Kaze no Stigma

Volume 2: The Price of A Soul

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Chapter 1: Banquet for Victory – The Chosen Ones

Part 1

It was a common occurrence.

You could say it's something that had become a part of their lives.

However, Yukari and Nanase could both sense the tension.

A tension that was hard to ignore.

"Didn't I say so already? You girls definitely won't be bored. I know a great club! I just need to show my face for us to get in."

"Come on! Let's go! What fun is there to be had with only girls?"

As the two exchanged glances, a group of men with weak appearances made a vulgar speech in a flippant manner. They didn't look too bad, but their idiotic speech and actions showed no class at all.

In simpler terms, they were trying to pick the girls up.

It was a common occurrence.

Even though their appearances may have differed, the three were beautiful girls that made one's eyes light up. They knew exactly how to deal with such pick-up artists. Or at least they did, until now.

"…"

Suddenly, the third girl, who had not spoken a word until now, began to move. She slowly raised her head and looked into the eyes of the man in front of her.

"That place is frequently visited by idols, stars, and models! We have many such friends, and if you are interested, we can introduce them to you…"

Glared at by cold eyes that chilled to the bone, the originally glib man was unable to speak another word.

"Get lost."

"…Yes."

The men left pitifully. Yet the girl did not even look at them and instead put on an unchanging, cold expression and left as if nothing had happened.

"…Ayano."

"What's wrong?"

The girl, Ayano Kannagi, seemed rather displeased, and turned her head with those words.

"You seem to be really harsh to the people who've tried to pick us up recently."

"It's just your imagination."

Ayano replied, straying from the point.

"But…"

Yukari lifted her head to look at Nanase with pleading eyes.

Nanase nodded and said, "Yup, you're really overdoing it recently. Let's take last time for example: you actually used the corner of your schoolbag to hit the guy's temple."

"Ah, that one was really scary. The whites of his eyes showed, and blood was flowing from his ears and nose–"

"…Does it matter, anyway? We called an ambulance for him."

Nanase looked hard at the moody Ayano and slowly closed in on the main point.

"Ayano, something happened between you and a guy, didn't it?"

"Wh–what… What are you talking about?!"

The sudden question left Ayano unable to hide the stir in her heart.

"Hehe~"

Nanase gave off a smile deep with meaning.

"You, a girl with a father-complex, finally seem to be starting to show interest in guys other than your father."

"I am not a father-lover."

Ayano swiftly regained her composure, and said strongly, "I've just never met a guy better than my father. That's all."

"…"

Nanase met Yukari's eyes, as if to say "What a headache," and sighed.

"I admit, your father is indeed a mature and relaxed middle-aged man, but you cannot possibly find that kind of feeling in a young guy, right?"

"That's not true. Father was young once too, so as long as I find someone similar–"

Halfway through, she shut her mouth and frowned, as the conversation had somehow reminded her of that detestable man.

Seemingly difficult to approach, yet uncommonly relaxed – a person undoubtedly qualified to be compared to her father.

He was not like Juugo at all. Indeed, he was the total opposite.

But… he was very powerful. Not just his strength, but his entire existence. In that sense, he was comparable to Juugo, the strongest man that she knew–

"Aya—-no~"

Hearing the call rife with laughter, Ayano, who had stopped moving, returned to her senses.

"You are thinking of the guy you like right now, aren't you?"

"Of… Of course not! That kind of guy!"

"What kind of guy?"

Having been asked such a question, Ayano lost her strength for a moment.

"Nanase… Even you…"

"Be honest! It's such an interesting topic. I bet even Yukari won't let it go easily either, right?"

"That's right. That's right."

Yukari nodded happily. Ayano stared at her two friends who intended to extract every single detail with antagonistic scrutiny.

Yukari Shinomiya and Nanase Kudo. They were both students of Seiryo Academy, where Ayano studied, and also her best friends – even though there were times when she wondered about the friendship between them.

Yukari's shoulder-length, beautiful hair moved up and down like waves, her face always showed a gentle smile, and her speech was slightly slow. It was unclear whether she should be considered "mellow" or just "slow." Regardless, from this description, you can probably imagine that she is a laid-back person.

In contrast, Nanase's hairstyle was a refreshing, blunt bob. She seemed casually calm, and her swift movements and tone showed no sign that they belonged to a girl, giving people an unsettled feeling, making her the type to receive a lot of chocolates on Valentine's Day.[1]

These two girls were opposites no matter how you look at it, but what was truly remarkable was that when they teased Ayano, they exhibited perfect harmony in their cooperation – although to Ayano, this was something unbearable.

"Come on. Tell us. What kind of person is he?"

"I already said there is no such person! By the way…"

Ayano stared at Yukari with accusing eyes.

"Aren't we going to eat some cake now?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Then why are we on this road?!"

In the direction which Ayano pointed her finger stood a long row of accommodations designed for a very specific purpose.

Just as with a haunted house in a backcountry area, though there was nothing particularly odd about their appearance, they possessed an atmosphere unlike that of a normal hotel.

That's right. For, as the three (except for a certain someone) were chatting happily, they had unintentionally come to the entrance of a street of love hotels.

Having realized that they were arguing in a special area, Ayano couldn't help but blush. But Yukari's smile did not change at all.

"This is a short-cut."

"Even so, this kind of place…"

"Don't worry. No one would think that we are going to play 3P."

Ayano's face carried a pained expression as she looked at this innocently smiling friend who had just said something very shocking.

"You… Don't use that cute face to say something so shocking, okay?"

"Kay~ But this kind of thing is nothing compared to your normal behavior."

"… What do you mean by that?"

Against Ayano's squinting eyes, Yukari put on her usual smiling face. Though she may have looked easy-going, she was definitely not on the losing side.

Ayano, who realized that she was at a disadvantage, decided to forcefully end the conversation.

"Anyway, let's not walk this way. Let's go another way!"

"Geez, you are so squeaky clean."

"Squeaky clean? That doesn't even need to be said! This kind of hotel, whose only use is for people to share a bed – who knows what the people going in are thinking?!"

Ayano sounded violent and scowled angrily at the love hotels as though they had killed her father, when suddenly, her expression froze.

Yukari and Nanase followed Ayano's line of sight. What lay there was…

"As agitated as always."

A man and a beautiful lady, sticking closely together, walking out from the hotel street.

His age appeared to be about twenty-something, with an upright face that could be considered handsome, but his expression seemed to be rather sloven. A light smirk appeared on his mouth, forcefully pulling his grade down thirty percent.

"You should at least think about where you are."

The man made fun of the dumbfounded Ayano and continued to speak.

"You're already a high school student. It's about time you knew what shame is…"

The man before her eyes was Kazuma Yagami. This was the man who Ayano hated most. As for the woman beside him, she had never seen her before. In addition, this was a love hotel street.

Having caught up to this point, Ayano's brain, which had finally returned to a normal temperature, suddenly began to heat up. Gripped with an inexplicable fury, Ayano shouted, "You… What are you doing in a place like this?!"

"…Ayano?"

Yukari and Nanase shared a puzzled look, looking at their friend who had suddenly fallen into a rage. Neither pair of eyes showed any indecision, and they seemed to be asking simultaneously, "What is she talking about?"

It wasn't a question that needed to be asked. Just as Ayano had said, there is only one thing to do in a love hotel – even if there are many different ways and methods of doing it; there is basically only one reason to be there.

On the other hand, Kazuma, who had drawn Ayano's rage upon him, simply showed a light smile, as usual.

"Asking me what I am doing… Ah, it is so hard to say it out loud~ ◎"

He acted shy, daintily using his hand to cover his mouth as he spoke.

At that moment, the dozens of logic-related neural synapses in Ayano's brain snapped all at once.

Feeling the furious spiritual energy coming from Ayano, Yukari and Nanase couldn't help but move back. But even when engulfed in such a strong murderous intent, one that even normal people would notice and fear, Kazuma and the woman beside him did not change the relaxed smiles on their faces.

The woman ignored Ayano's furious eyes as if they were nothing. She put her lips close to Kazuma's ear and asked, "This girl, is she your girlfriend?"

"Kirika… That joke isn't funny at all!"

After such a semi-derogatory question, Kazuma answered with an irritated look. Listening, Kirika glanced at Ayano and laughed lightly.

(…! This darn woman–!)

Seeing the seemingly taunting attitude of this person, Ayano viewed Kirika as an "enemy." As if seeking a weak spot, she sized up Kirika from head to toe. But…

(Argh…)

Though slim, she had a good figure filled with femininity.

From the angle of a "woman," Ayano had no way to compete.

Ayano was also a rare beauty, but her state of maturity was far below Kirika's. Future development or hidden potential had no effect now. Because in a battle in the real world, current capabilities decide everything.

Even so, if her opponent were just someone who devoted all nutrients – even those that should go to the brain – into her breasts and hips, Ayano would not concede defeat.

But Kirika was different. Those thin, long eyes of hers carried the light of wisdom, clearly indicating that she was not just some vulgar woman who only knew how to fawn on guys.

Slightly older than Kazuma, she looked as if she was around twenty-five. From the way she could casually face up to Ayano's killing intent as if it were not there, she was clearly not an average businesswoman. Maybe they were in the same trade?

Ayano bore the silent torture of inferiority and continued to glare at the two with angry eyes.

"Kazuma?"

Kirika accepted Ayano's eyes generously and held her body even more closely against Kazuma's arm. Rather than a demonstration of love, this action seemed more like she was trying to hang on tightly.

"Should I arrest you for lewd acts against an underage female?"

"Don't be like that."

Kazuma seemed very displeased.

"She is just a distant relative. I've done nothing, nor have any intentions of doing anything."

"Then why is she angry?"

"She's always angry. Just ignore her."

"Oh~"

Kirika looked towards Ayano once more, her face showing a smile with deep meaning. Ayano noticed, her mind tangling in an instant.

ポッ

"I think it would be better to explain."

"There's no need for that. It's too troublesome. Let's go!"

Upon saying this, Kazuma pulled Kirika and walked away. As his eyes meet Ayano's, he put on a serious expression and warned Ayano, "Go back quickly! This is no place for children."

Kazuma walked past Ayano with ease, who was so angry her whole body was trembling. As the two sides passed one another, Kirika looked at Ayano before departing in an utterly relaxed manner. Those eyes, filled with sympathy, totally enraged Ayano.

Yukari remained where she was, silently sending off the close pair with her eyes. She looked to the side and coincidentally met Nanase's eyes.

At that moment, silence was golden. The two exchanged bitter smiles, and as if they had discussed it much earlier, looked towards Ayano who still had not turned back.

"So that's it."

Nanase nodded heavily.

"No wonder you were so harsh to those people who tried to pick us up."

"That's right. It is really tough to like someone like that."

"But what a surprise. I never thought Ayano would like flippant guys like that."

"…You two…"

Ayano turned slowly.

In a gentle, but equally chilling tone, she answered, "What are you two talking about?"

"What else?"

Yukari answered straightforwardly.

"Ayano, you like that guy right? Although it looks one-sided."

"You… What makes you two think that way?"

"Just think about your reaction just now. No matter how we look at it, it is the reaction of 'a jealous girl seeing the guy she likes getting snatched away,' right?"

"There is no such thing! It is definitely not that way!!"

Ayano shouted out, blushing. Her voice was so loud it almost seemed to reach as far as the eye could see.

"Ayano, you're too loud."

Ignoring Yukari's warning, Ayano furiously continued to say, "Why would I like that kind of lowlife?! That is the type of person I hate most in this world! If I could have, I would have sliced him into pieces!!"

"Then why are you angry?"

Yukari rebutted with a calm voice.

"If you really didn't like him, then it wouldn't matter who he sleeps with, right? What would there be to be angry about?"

"That… That's because… That…

…I just cannot bear to see someone like Kazuma sleep with that kind of beauty! They are not at all compatible!"

Ayano gripped her fist tightly and tried her best to explain, as the other two looked at her with cold eyes.

(What do you think?)

(She doesn't seem to be lying… Could it be that she hasn't even realized it herself?)

(If that's the case, then she's not just slow – there's something completely wrong with her…)

(But… that is just like Ayano.)

(Yeah, that's true)

"You two! Don't whisper among yourselves right in front of me!"

Having gotten shouted at by Ayano, Nanase swiftly straightened her body. Following this, she used a very serious expression, like someone who is faking marriage just to grab a hold of the password to a credit card, in order to say, "Ah. Okay, okay. I get it, you really hate that man."

"Yup, completely understood."

Yukari chimed in instantly. They were indeed Ayano's best friends, their actions matching flawlessly.

Ayano's expression revealed her continued suspicion.

"…Really?"

"Of course."

"Fine then."

Ayano nodded, though her expression still showed displeasure. After everything had come to an end, and the two of them had given a sigh of relief–

"Ah, that is the girl. Mr. Hanagi."

Those guys had chosen the worst possible time to appear.

"These are the ones?"

The man they called Hanagi pointed his finger towards the three and said…

"You guys were scared off by these three girls?"

"Because the girl in the middle has a really scary stare…"

"That girl is really arrogant. Please teach her some manners, Go-san!"

The men who were saying these things were the punks, numbers one and two (temporarily named), who had been driven off by Ayano earlier. It seemed that because they had been rejected so vehemently by Ayano, resentment had arisen, and so they had found someone to help them take their revenge!

– They don't come any lower than that.

"We invited you so nicely to have some fun, and yet you told us to 'get lost.' That was really rude. Now apologize."

"…"

Ayano stared at the group of men, her eyes indicating that they were unworthy even of notice. Seeing those ice cold eyes, punks numbers one and two couldn't help but retreat several steps, though Hanagi showed no sign of fear.

"That trick of yours won't work! Hanagi-san knows Shaolin fist techniques!"

"Please do it! Go Hanagi-san!"

Numbers one and two cowered behind Hanagi and continued to shout. Ignoring the two who were merely relying on Hanagi's strength, Ayano stared at Hanagi alone.

As they had mentioned, the man before her eyes seemed to have undergone a certain level of training. As he wore only a thin, sleeveless sweater under his leather coat, his protruding muscles could be clearly seen. It was a body specially made for combat.

"For a woman to be so arrogant, that's why you are having such an unlucky encounter. Don't try to go against men from now on."

Hanagi reached his hand out in a rough manner, intending to grab Ayano's chin to lift her face.

At the instant his fingertips touched her chin, Ayano moved swiftly.

She angled her body and moved forward, while at the same time dodging Hanagi's hand. Ayano cleanly swung her bent left arm into Hanagi's defenseless chest.

Ayano's elbow struck the lower region of Hanagi's earlobe, where his jaw was. This was a sudden, full-force attack and a powerful strike that even contained *ki*. It would not have been surprising if his jaw had fallen off of his face.

Hanagi's body flew into the air in a spiral. His legs, which had left the ground, tangled together like twisted bread and subsequently splayed outwards with reactive force.

Hanagi's body kept on spinning, and after a sickening three and a half round rotation, he naturally had a failed landing – his whole body flattened against the outer wall of a hotel.

Splat.

A wet sound propagated along the entire street. This was definitely not a sound made by a human body. If a freshly slaughtered piece of flesh, with

blood still dripping, were smashed into a wall, it would probably make this kind of sound.

Several seconds after Hanagi has been hammered into the wall, he fell to the floor like a flattened cockroach.

On the red bricks of the hotel wall, a fluid even more red than the bricks formed an eerie human figure.

"Uh… Uh~"

Seeing Hanagi, blood pouring out of seven holes and his body twitching, Nanase drew a cross towards the sky. Beside her, Yukari placed her hands together and closed her eyes to pray.

"Huh… Huh huh…"

"Hanagi-san…"

The remaining two guys gave voice to pitiful cries in tones that had reached the utmost limit of fear.

Ayano silently walked past the two men, who were unable to move their feet, and could only stand there like idiots.

She fired off two kicks at lightning speed. The tip of her foot hit right in the center between the legs of the two men.

"Argh!"

"Wah!"

The tip of her pointed shoe hit the pelvis, while the most important part was struck heavily. Ayano contemplated the two, now rolling on the ground in pain with a pink foam of blood and spittle coming from their mouths, with disgust.

"How dirty!"

"Ah– Please send an ambulance over. There are three heavily wounded people."

A cold voice came from behind. Behind her, Nanase was using a public phone to contact 911. She read out the number of the phone booth to inform the other party of the location.

"Please be quick. One of them doesn't seem likely to make it."

After that, she hung up, ignoring their inquiries for her name. This action could be said to be very well-trained since the reason she didn't use her own cellphone was to avoid leaving any trace.

"So, have you vented your anger?" Nanase asked Ayano calmly.

"…I didn't do it on purpose."

Ayano pouted and replied unhappily, but the two did not believe her.

They had known very well since the beginning that she had just been redirecting her anger at Kazuma. If she had not met Kazuma earlier, Ayano would not have been so cruel!

But there was one thing they did not understand. Nanase leaned in close to Yukari's ear and quietly asked…

(By the way, is that guy really that good?)

(Hmm… I feel that he is above average, but…)

He did not seem like a man that would make Ayano feel jealous. That was their opinion.

For though they had known Ayano for a long time, they still did not know what the Kannagis did for a living, nor of the power that was within their bloodline.

They would still have a few days to wait before witnessing for themselves the true power of Kazuma.

Part 2

"Has Kazuma still not arrived?"

"Why are you asking me?"

Ayano replied to the Soushu's, Juugo's, question in a sour tone of voice. She appeared to have drunken some alcohol, and her gaze seemed blank.

Stared at by his daughter, who was radiating malcontent, Juugo blinked.

"What is it between you and Kazuma?"

"Nothing."

Ayano slammed the wine cup on the table with a bang.

"I hate that guy! I don't want to see his face or hear his name ever again! That sort of guy can just go have a good time with some old woman!"

"…So that is it."

Juugo could roughly guess what had happened and decided not to probe any further.

"In celebration of the annihilation of the Fuuga clan!"

"Cheers to Hyoue who is now roasting in hell, suffering for all eternity!"

"Cheers!"

Vulgar toasts like this one abounded. Everyone seemed exuberant, and the air was filled with the sound of cups clinking in toasts.

The cause for celebration was something that had happened about a week ago.

The subordinates of the Kannagis, the Fuuga clan, had suddenly revolted. The leader of the Fuuga clan, Hyoue Kazamaki, had allowed his son Ryuuya to be possessed by a powerful *youma*, and many of the Kannagis had been killed.

The ones who had fought them were Ayano and Ren, practitioners of the Kannagi main family, and Ren's brother, Kazuma Yagami, who had been exiled due to his ineptitude as an *En-jutsushi* and had eventually become a *Fuu-jutsushi*.

After a fierce battle, the three had finally defeated Hyoue and Ryuuya. On the fourth day following, that is, that evening, a banquet for their victory was being held.

The banquet was unlike any before it. Just about every member of the Kannagi family able to attend was in attendance. They had all joyfully joined the

banquet and were now raising their cups in celebration of the annihilation of their hated enemy.

This reaction came as no surprise. For these people, who claimed to be the strongest, Hyoue and Ryuya, had been existences who could not be permitted.

The fact that they had been able to possess a *youma* beyond their powers was in and of itself unforgivable. Furthermore, they had been of the Fuuga clan, a group of low level *jutsushis* who they had stepped on for a long period of time.

For them, to fear weaklings like the Fuugas to the extent that they had had to go into hiding was a humiliation that could never be vindicated.

However, since the Fuuga clan had been completely destroyed, that shame, if not erased, was at least forgotten. In their joy, it wasn't at all odd for them to be going somewhat overboard in their celebrations.

"Hmph! For those dogs to forget who had raised and fed them and to even go so far as to bite their masters' hands! Those ungrateful bastards!"

"How dare they resist us? We, who are blessed by the Spirit Lord! What an outrage!"

"Cheers to the Fuuga clan's demise!"

"Cheers!"

All around the tables, cups met, and everyone downed their cups in one go.

Just as the banquet was approaching its climax, Kazuma appeared.

"Kazuma-san has arrived."

As the servant made his announcement, all noise in the hall came to an abrupt halt.

Amidst the silence, a youth walked through the paper door the servant had opened and stepped into the hall with a confident swagger.

Unfriendly eyes gathered upon this youth who walked in without a word. Just for the record, among the glares, the one which bore the greatest hatred was Ayano's, but let's leave that matter aside for now.

Actually, it was not without reason that this man was so despised. The Kannagis had had over fifty *jutsushis* before the battle with the Fuuga clan, and yet there were only a few more than thirty present at the banquet. The total dead and wounded amounted to more than twenty.

Seven were dead, the rest injured with varying degrees of severity. Those seven had been attacked by Ryuya – the only ones attacked by Ryuuya.

In other words, the majority of the casualties were the work of Kazuma. Everyone gathered here had family members who had been sent to the hospital by Kazuma. Under such circumstances, it was only natural that they didn't wear smiles to welcome him.

Their hateful glares glanced off of Kazuma, who acted as if they weren't even there. His attitude served only to increase their hatred for him.

This was the sort of feeling you get from being looked down on by someone whom you had looked down on in the past. Needless to say, Kazuma completely ignored their presence. He seemed to consider them beneath contempt. No matter how much Juugo tried to defend him, the negative feelings toward Kazuma only strengthened further.

Kazuma nodded toward Ren, the only one who smiled at him, and then bowed before Juugo.

"Sorry I'm late."

"I don't mind at all. I am the one who forced you to join us."

Juugo smiled, forgiving Kazuma's tardiness, and told Kazuma to sit beside him. In short order, wine and hors d'oeuvres were placed before Kazuma's eyes.

"Welcome back, Nii-sama!"

Ren ran over and hugged his brother's arm tightly like a spoiled puppy. Kazuma didn't stop him. On the contrary, he reached out his hand to caress his brother's head. But he didn't give the customary reply, "I'm back."

Because, for a long time now, this place had not been Kazuma's, that is, Kazuma Yagami's, home.

Ren didn't seem to notice Kazuma's thoughts and served him diligently.

"Ah, let me pour you some wine."

"…Okay."

Kazuma lifted the cup with his hands but put it back on the table without drinking a single drop.

Ren questioned hesitantly, "Nii-sama, why not have a drink?"

"I'm not thirsty."

Ren looked at the untouched food.

"…Won't you eat something?"

"I'm not hungry."

"…"

Ren felt puzzled and lifted his eyes to look at his brother.

Kazuma continued to look straight ahead, ignoring Ren.

"Erm… Err…"

Just as Ren began to panic, thinking he had done something to anger his brother, a big hand was placed lightly on Ren's head.

"…Nii-sama?"

The direction of Kazuma's gaze hadn't changed, nor did he speak. In spite of this, the feeling of that warm hand was enough to satisfy Ren. Leaning against his brother's body, Ren closed his eyes and showed a peaceful smile.

To Kazuma, the Kannagi residence was still enemy territory. Not only would he not eat any food placed before him, no matter how relaxed the others might look, he wouldn't let his guard down even for an instant.

That is why Kazuma noticed immediately when a young woman approached him.

He deliberately didn't move, observing her as if nothing untoward was happening, waiting for her to take action.

The young woman was around twenty and was wearing a kimono. She seemed to be used to wearing one, for her actions were not the least bit awkward.

Her hairstyle, rather than being a blunt blob, was more of a round and simple hairstyle with its sides cut evenly. Together with small, cute cheeks, she was a beautiful Japanese-style woman that would make you think of the outdated appellation "Yamato Nadeshi-ko."

Seeing the girl kneeling before him bow deeply, Kazuma said with a hazy expression, "If I recall… You are Ogami…"

"My name is Misao Ogami. I've been ordered to take care of Kazuma-sama. If you have any needs, please just inform me."

"…Oh?"

Kazuma used his fingertips to hold Misao's chin and lift up her face.

Looking at her nervous expression, Kazuma smiled and asked teasingly, "Even at night?"

Faced with such a direct intimation, Misao blushed and her eyes shifted downward. Even though she was embarrassed, she didn't try to escape from Kazuma's hand. She murmured in hardly a whisper, "If… that is your wish."

Seeing that Misao didn't resist, Kazuma's face closed in even more. At that moment, Kazuma, as if repelled, suddenly leaned back.

A ray of red lightning pierced the air where Kazuma's head had just been. With a loud thunk, something embedded itself in the pillar behind him.

"You despicable piece of shit! Get your dirty hands off her!"

Needless to say, the furious girl with the incomparable rage was Ayano. Kazuma didn't even bother to look at her, but instead turned his head back.

A long, thin red stick was now embedded in the pillar – Ayano's chopstick.

The chopstick possessed no sharp point, and yet it was half-sunken into the pillar. Guessing at the strength with which she must have thrown it, Kazuma laughed.

Ayano stalked toward Kazuma and raised her hand for a karate chop, aiming at Kazuma's hand, which had been on Misao's face the entire time. Seeing a chop that carried the strength to break thirty tiles, he quickly removed his hand.

Ayano had murder in her eyes as she scowled at Kazuma, who had a smile on his face, and then slowly walked next to Misao.

"Misao, what are you thinking! Why ruin your life for scum like that?!"

"Huh… Ermm… Sorry."

Faced with such an aggressive aura, Misao couldn't help but apologize. Seeing such a happy scene, Kazuma purposely put on a hurt expression.

"Why are you making me sound so bad?"

"I was just telling the truth, wasn't I? You already have a girlfriend. How dare you still lay your hands on other girls?! You jerk!"

"Girlfriend? I don't have a girlfriend."

"Liar! That one earlier…"

"If you mean Kirika, we're not in that kind of relationship. She is just–"

"Just your sex friend, right?"

Ayano finished Kazuma's sentence in an eerily gentle tone. Even though her face showed a smile, upon closer inspection, her temples were pulsing with anger.

Observing her expression, Kazuma smiled at her comprehension, and said, "Yup, you could put it that way too."

Violent spiritual energy burst forth from Ayano's entire body, and her body subconsciously entered battle mode.

"Ayano-sama."

However, she was stopped just before she could erupt. Confronted with Misao's appeal, Ayano was reluctantly forced to restrain her murderous intent.

"Please, don't be angry. It was Kazuma-sama who avenged my brothers. To repay that debt, this sort of thing is nothing…"

"You should be grateful to me instead!" Ayano said proudly.

"This guy only fought because it was his job! We've already paid him enough to reward him! There's no need to thank him. You have a problem with that?"

This last line was, of course, directed at Kazuma.

"Nope, that is largely true." Kazuma admitted frankly.

"I don't know what this fiery lass did that you should be grateful for, but at the very least, there is no need to thank me. Leaving Masato and Takeshi aside, you can consider half of the blame that Takeya died to be mine."

Upon such a shocking statement, a commotion erupted around them.

After making so much noise, it was only natural that they had attracted notice. Their bickering had become the center of attention, and to hear such an alarming statement made everyone prick up their ears and listen quietly.

"What do you mean?" Ayano asked in a sharp tone.

Kazuma brushed off her intensity like a thick-skinned willow tree brushes off the wind and smiled.

"Even though the one who killed him was Ryuuya, he had already been defeated earlier by me. Ryuuya only cut the unconscious Takeya apart. Well, I guess that even if he had still been conscious then, the result wouldn't have been any different."

Kazuma said this nonchalantly and shifted his eyes back to Misao. He faced the bowed-down Misao, whose expression could not be seen, and reassured her gently.

“So, you see? There’s no need to be so courteous. How about taking that out of your sleeve?”

At the instant Kazuma finished his sentence, Misao suddenly moved. Her foot forcefully stomping on the tatami, she pulled out the dagger which had been hidden in her sleeve all along.

"Ah… Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

Screaming wildly, the dagger gripped tightly in her fists, Misao jumped into Kazuma's chest.

For a moment, everyone remained completely motionless. Though everyone in the hall had witnessed the scene, it appeared that they were unable to comprehend its implications in time and were at a loss for what to do.

Misao and Kazuma both just sat there without flinching, like a pair of intimate lovers, the two in a silent embrace.

"Ka… Kazuma?"

Ayano's quivering voice called out the name of the man she hated most.

He did not reply.

"Kazuma?! Ans… Answer me quickly! Kazuma! Kazuma!!"

"What?"

Kazuma suddenly raised his head and answered as if nothing had happened. Using his fingertips to pinch the dagger that should have been in Misao's hands, he raised it before his eyes and waved it.

"…!"

Maybe because of her relief, Ayano fell to the floor, still in shock, and shouted loudly, "If… If you heard me, you should have at least made a sound! I'd thought that you'd died!"

"Is there anything troubling to you about my death?"

"That… That…"

Ayano was momentarily unable to speak. She tried her best to stop all the blood in her body from gathering at her face, while at the same time working hard to come up with a rebuttal.

"I… I don't want Misao to become a murderer."

"That makes sense."

"That's right!"

(…?)

Ayano nodded in agreement, but felt that Kazuma's reaction seemed off somehow. At the same time,

she couldn't say with certainty what was wrong about it.

Ignoring Ayano, who was puzzling over this, Kazuma placed his eyes on Misao, who had fallen on him.

"So are you still angry?"

"…!"

Misao forcefully pushed herself off of Kazuma and used the momentum to jump backward. She put a little distance between them and stared at Kazuma with eyes full of hatred.

But Kazuma didn't seem to mind those eyes at all. He calmly broke eye contact with Misao and passed the dagger in his hand to Ayano.

"Take it."

"Ah, okay."

She took it reflexively and then looked closely at the dagger.

The blade of the dagger was about ten centimeters long. It would serve well for peeling apples and not much more. There didn't appear to be any poison on it either.

(…Did she really think that a fruit knife could kill Kazuma?)

What a foolish action. Ayano bitterly regretted her earlier display of anxiousness.

At that point in time, the others were finally emerging from their shock. However, none stood up to arrest Misao because all of the people in the branch family felt the same way.

(What about Father?)

Ayano looked toward Juugo.

"What is the matter?"

"What do you mean by 'What is the matter?' Don't just look. Do something."

"Hmm…"

Juugo looked at the scene of the crime with cold eyes.

"Kazuma."

"Ah?"

"If you do not wish to deal with her, shall I punish Misao for you?"

Even though his tone seemed calm, its meaning was clear. "If you want to kill her, just do it." Juugo was usually kind and well-tempered, but he was not

so kind as to forgive someone who had just attempted murder.

Kazuma's reply was totally unexpected.

"I don't think this goes so far as to require punishment. Nothing happened. Just let her go!"

Upon hearing this reply, Juugo revealed a surprised expression, and Ayano's puzzled look could be clearly seen.

Ayano finally realized why she has been feeling that something was off. Misao was still alive. That alone was something which didn't make sense.

On the battlefield, Kazuma wouldn't have cared about anything else. Even if it was just a little girl, even if she was not moving of her own free will or if she was being threatened or manipulated, Kazuma wouldn't have gone easy on her.

Given Kazuma's habits, after he had dodged the attack, no, the instant the dagger had been drawn, Misao's head should have landed on the floor.

(But this… What was going on?)

Filled with questions, Ayano began to look at the two.

Misao looked pale and weak. Though her eyes still bore hatred, it seemed that she did not have the strength to act again.

Her area of expertise was in defending seals and providing support from behind; she was not a *jutsushi* who fought on the frontline. Although her abilities were not weak, her personality was simply not suited to battle, let alone killing.

This may even have been the first time she had directed a knife at someone. Her mentality of avoiding causing harm was no different from a normal person's. Just now she had acted on impulse, but after her failure, she didn't have the ability to try again.

Kazuma lowered his head and looked silently at Misao. Those eyes carried no warmth, but neither did they show coldness.

(This is too abnormal, too weird! And… this makes me feel very unhappy!)

"What is the meaning of this–?"

"So be it. Since you have said as much, I have no reason to punish her either."

Juugo interrupted Ayano, who had lost her composure, and came to a simple conclusion.

"But we cannot allow you to stay here either. Go back and reflect on this for a while!"

With that, he ordered someone by his side to take Misao away. Misao struggled to get rid of the hands that were about to catch her.

"Why?!"

Ignoring the man who seemed troubled by her struggling, Misao stared at Kazuma and shouted, "Why did Nii-sama have to die?!"

"Because he was too weak."

Kazuma replied very bluntly.

"…!!"

The hall was filled with rage in an instant. Misao was not alone in feeling that Kazuma has caused deaths in the family. To these people, Kazuma's words had gone far beyond their ability to tolerate.

"You asshole…!!"

Ayano stood up, her face flushed red with anger. She placed her hands on her hips and glared at Kazuma.

"What the hell is wrong with you! Can't you differentiate between what can and cannot be said?! What do you mean by 'because he was too weak?' Don't joke

around! Is it because you have become strong that you have forgotten what it was like to be weak?!"

Kazuma showed Ayano, who continued to lecture him, no sign of remorse at all. Instead, he looked at her coldly.

"Looks like you still don't understand."

He then looked around at the people who were staring at him angrily.

"Why are you all putting on the look of a victim?"

"What… What do you mean by that?"

Kazuma's eyes swept across the room once more. All he saw were puzzled yet angry expressions. Again confirming that no one had understood what he meant, he sighed.

"I don't think you guys have ever wondered why the Fuuga clan revolted."

"What do you mean by why… Of course it was to awaken their God!"

"No."

Kazuma rejected this flat-out.

"That was just a means to an end, just one of the powers they needed to rise against the Kannagis."

"Why don't you tell us the reason then?" Ayano asked without even thinking.

Kazuma gave Ayano a contemptuous look.

"…These people of the Fuuga clan were definitely not a group of useless waste. Instead, they were even rather skilled *Fuu-jutsushi*. Their combat abilities might have been very weak, but the inherent characteristics of wind are not suited to battle in the first place."

In terms of attack power, among the four main powers – earth, water, fire, and wind – wind was the weakest.

This was because it was the lightest.

No matter how fast they might be, light attacks did not possess the strength to kill with one blow.

I believe that everyone has had the experience of being cut by a piece of paper before. With enough speed, and if timed well, even a flimsy piece of paper can become a blade. And yet, it can only cut the surface of the skin. A slash without weight is unable to cut off flesh and bone all in one go.

The weight of water and earth is far beyond that of wind, and fire possesses a large amount of energy. If

they were to fight against these powers, a *Fuu-jutsushi* would have to summon and control several times more spirits than they would.

Precisely for this reason, the role *Fuu-jutsushis* played was to use the wind's mobility to search and to track, as well as to control the surrounding air while providing battle support. The Fuuga clan could actually have been said to have been a typical example of wind practitioners.

"The Kannagis were born with combat abilities, and the Fuugas excelled at information gathering and battle support. To provide for the other's inability, to coexist peacefully and equally, that should have been the way that they interacted."

Out of the corner of his eye, Kazuma observed Juugo, who was showing a bitter expression. He was the only one there who understood the truth of Kazuma's words.

"Unfortunately, you, who only know how to use raw power as a standard, looked down on the Fuuga clan, who had no combat abilities. But without the Fuuga, you would not even have known where the enemy was!"

"What you are trying to say is… because we have always looked down on the Fuuga, we deserved to be killed by them?" Ayano pouted unhappily.

But Kazuma shook his head in denial.

"I never said that what you did was wrong. The strong are always right; that is the unequivocal truth."

"But then…"

"But as you execute your right to crush the weak, you must also bear the burden of being crushed by people even stronger. Even if you are killed, you can have no complaints as this is the very thing you have done."

"…!"

Ayano's expression changed drastically. She seemed to have understood what Kazuma was trying to say.

"Just because the Fuuga clan was 'too weak,' that was why you all looked down on them. Just because *you* are 'too weak,' that is why you were crushed by Ryuuya. It is a very simple thing to understand."

This was not a question of who was right and who was wrong. Since both sides believed in the "law of

power," in the end, only the strong survived. That was all.

"If you people have acknowledged everything that you have done toward the Fuuga clan, then the Fuuga clan can also only acknowledge what they did to you. To crush the weak, does it not allow you to be crushed by those even stronger? Just who do you think you are?"

This merciless accusation reached the ears of everyone present like the roar of thunder, but it failed to touch their arrogant hearts.

"This, I am unable to accept."

A voice of disagreement emerged from a place very close to Juugo's seat of honor.

"Kazuma-san, your argument seems to have neglected one very important fact."

The man spoke in a vicious and unrelenting tone. He was Masayuki Ogami, the head of the Ogami family, and Misao's father. But he did not seem to care at all about his daughter, who had her head lowered and was keeping quiet.

"The value of our lives is definitely not equal. We, the Kannagis, are blessed by the spirits – a chosen

clan! Yet you put us and the Fuugas, those lowlifes, on the same level. That is very appalling. Not to mention, it…"

He stared furiously at Kazuma, as if Kazuma was the killer of his son.

"Not to mention, it gives those scum the right to kill us!"

Hearing Masayuki's words, Kazuma answered with a calm smile.

"Who is it that was chosen?"

"…What?"

"Those words. Why don't you wait until you have power like Ayano's before saying them! To hear a weakling boasting about his bloodline, how pathetic! It is as if you have nothing else to boast about except your bloodline."

"You… You asshole…!"

Masayuki instantly became agitated. In comparison, Kazuma's mocking tone still hadn't changed.

"By the way, you should be thanking Hyoue instead!"

"?"

"He helped you to get rid of Masato, who was a nuisance in your eyes. At the very least, go burn some incense and pay your respects!"

"…! You…! What did you just say…!"

When Masayuki Ogami's younger brother, Masato Ogami, had been alive, he had been known as the strongest practitioner of the branch family. Everyone knew that had he not left his home to train because he had hated fighting with his brother over the succession, he would have been the one to lead the family.

Seeing the shaken Masayuki, Kazuma said as if taunting him.

"It *is* a nuisance to have a younger brother better than you, isn't it?"

"Damn… Damn you, you asshole!!"

Masayuki's face changed color as he shouted. He stood up from the tatami, and with blood red eyes, stared murder at Kazuma.

This time, there was an almost palpable tension between the two. The killing intents around the room formed a whirlpool and gathered around Kazuma, who was still sitting in his original spot.

At that moment, Ren, who had been leaning against Kazuma's shoulder, moved. He wriggled his upper body, his whole body stuck on Kazuma in a tight embrace. He looked as if he was trying to stop Kazuma and lacked the strength to do so.

Seeing this, a question went through Ayano's mind.

(This kid… Since when did he become so quiet?)

Even when Misao had attempted to stab Kazuma, she had not heard Ren's voice. No matter how much faith he had in his brother's strength, it was unnatural for him to not so much as cry out.

Under everyone's stare, Ren's upper body slowly slid down along Kazuma's body. He placed his face on Kazuma's leg, and after a few seconds like this…

"Hmm… Nii-sama…"

"So he is asleep!" Ayano couldn't help but say.

Before the blissful sleep-talking, the originally tense atmosphere dispersed in an instant.

"…"

His bloodlust gone, Masayuki sat down once more. His expression was solemn, but he no longer was in the mood to maintain his anger.

Masayuki's reaction did not matter to Kazuma, as he had not cared from the beginning.

"Soushu."

"…Yes."

Juugo understood everything very well, and because of that, his voice sounded abnormally bitter.

"It is impossible to dream of these guys reflecting upon this. But please do not forget, it is the Kannagis' arrogance that sparked this fight. If there are no changes, the same thing will just repeat itself."

"…I understand."

"Good."

Kazuma lifted Ren's head and placed him on Ayano's leg.

"Kazuma?"

"There is nothing left for me here. I am going back."

With this sentence, Kazuma left the residence without looking back.

Chapter 2: Assault – Determination After Removing All Doubts

Part 1

The boy's arm was wreathed in red flame.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

A wordless scream escaped the boy's mouth.

So hot – there was no room in his mind for anything but the heat, all thought being stolen by the crimson flame.

He continuously rolled on the ground, attempting to extinguish the flame. Nearby, some children observed his pitiable state.

I say children, but that belies the range of their ages. The smallest were young children of only four or five while the oldest were full-grown teenagers of fifteen or sixteen.

Their sole common denominator could be seen on their faces.

Scorn.

This group of children joyfully surrounded the burning youth, laughing with mirth.

An unfeigned laughter that came from the heart. Innocent. Naive. Cruel.

The cruelty of a child who cannot differentiate between right and wrong. Like children who pluck off the wings of a dragonfly just to watch it struggle, they enjoyed the youth's predicament as he painfully struggled the same way.

"A member of the main family getting burned by fire!"

"How useless!"

"'A humiliation to the clan,' my father said!"

"Someone as worthless as you has no right to bear the name 'Kannagi!'"

The boy could only hug his burnt arm, his face showing a painful expression as the others continued to mock him, one after another.

"It's my turn!"

A young girl around ten years old raised her hand to declare.

"Oh– Go on. Quickly now!"

The children cheered. The girl, encouraged, held her fist to her chest and began to concentrate.

"Heh!"

Following the cute shout, a red flame suddenly appeared like a ghost above the cringing youth.

The fire slowly descended until it touched the boy's back.

Sssssssss!

"…!"

The sound of burning meat could be heard. The youth's body, originally curled into a ball, straightened out forcefully. This scene served only to amplify the mocking.

"My turn next!"

"I wanna go too!"

His legs, his back, his shoulders – all were continuously tattooed by the ferocious flame. Each time the boy's body instinctively twitched. Each time it gave off a burning smell.

Despite the horrid cruelty of their actions, none present felt the least degree of guilt. To them, fire was nothing to fear.

Were they to be put in his shoes, they would not experience the smallest discomfort. Even for those whose "power" was 'weak,' the most that would burn

would be their clothes – their bodies would remain completely unharmed.

This was because their clan had been blessed with fire's protection.

Because of this, these children were completely unaware of the dangers of fire, and they did not understand the pain of being scorched.

You cannot imagine what you do not know, and because they were unable to imagine the pain, they saw nothing wrong with what they were doing.

The boy silently endured the innocent and naive torture of the other children in the clan alone.

"Ah… Ah…"

By the time the children were finally satisfied, the youth was left to painfully contend with his smoking body.

"Ahhh– that was fun."

"Bye bye. Let's play again~"

As part of their exit ritual, everyone present gave the twitching body a merciless kick. But before anyone could leave, the eldest and largest boy went further and stomped on the boy's head.

"…Hmm?"

"What's wrong with Toru?"

Hearing the large boy, Toru Kuga, let out a pathetic cry, the others turned in surprise.

"You… You foolish idiot!"

The head that Toru had forcefully stepped on was now slowly lifting itself upward. The youth used his hands as support against the ground and stared intently at Toru from below.

"You… What are you trying to do…?"

Seeing those eyes, filled with murder, Toru couldn't help but retreat in fright. Immediately filled with shame at his actions, he became angry.

"What's with that look? This worthless scum actually dares to resist?!"

Toru summoned a flame, angrily throwing it in the youth's direction.

The youth quickly rose and dodged the incoming flame. Dragging his heavily wounded frame, he dashed at incredible speed, closing in on Toru.

"W… Wah…"

Aiming directly at the terrified Toru's face, he exerted all the strength in his body to strike him with his palm.

Pachunk! [SFX: something breaking]

Toru's nose had broken.

"Toru!"

While the group could only stare, aghast at the sudden incident, the boy attacked two more people. Driven in his berserk rage, his fist broke the first's cheekbones and the second's chin, causing them to roll in pain as he did earlier.

"…Wu…Ah…!"

But his mad rush ended there. The burden his actions had placed on his pained body was beyond the limits of his will. His stomach heaved, and as if trying to reject everything, he vomited over and over.

"You…! How dare you…!"

Realizing that they were no longer at risk, the others took heart. In order to punish this thing that didn't know its place, they began to focus their mental energy.

But–

"All of you… Get lost!"

A weak, yet furious voice stopped them. They looked back in fear, and before their eyes was…

"I am going to slaughter you…"

Fresh blood streaming from his nose, Toru gazed at the boy with bloodshot, insane eyes, devoid of reason.

"I am so going to slaughter you–!"

An insane fury amplified Toru's abilities severalfold. Stretching his right hand directly upward, he summoned a huge fireball that seemed encased by a pair of hands.

"Go and die!"

The youth's eyes didn't blink. They could only stare at the fireball. Despite his body's inability to move, he refused to give in. Like a wounded beast with death fast approaching, he searched for any sign of weakness in his enemy.

– Kaboom!

"Hmph! Now you know my strength!"

Seeing the youth wrapped in flame, Toru smiled.

The flame gradually dispersed. But amidst the disappearing flame, what appeared was…

"Ah… Ah?"

Contrary to Toru's expectations, the boy yet lived. Parts of his body were burnt black, but his limbs still remained; he had successfully withstood Toru's flame.

Using every last drop of his *ki* to create a defensive barrier, the youth had just barely managed to survive.

"You… You asshole…"

Toru's expression grew more sinister. If he were to prove unable to beat this youth who lacked even a hint of ability as an *En-jutsu*, he would forever be looked down upon and despised by the others.

"Arrogant trash!"

This scream, filled with displeasure, failed to reach the boy's ears. His body had long since surpassed its limits, and having spent all his *ki,* he was no different from a walking corpse.

Not content to simply leave the youth to die, Toru prepared to give him a fatal strike. Against his fate, the youth was helpless.

"…"

Kazuma suddenly opened his eyes. This was a rare occasion for him – he usually had a hard time waking up – but his consciousness was fully awake.

But it was only to be expected. How could anyone refuse to wake up after having a dream like that?

Maintaining his waking posture, Kazuma faced upward and he looked silently at the ceiling. Unblinking, he remained like this for a full half-minute.

"Frankly speaking, what an unpleasant dream."

Closing his eyes, he emptied all the air in his lungs with a moan.

Something that had happened exactly ten years ago, a painful experience that caused nightmares.

Of the eighteen years he had spent among the Kannagis, that was his most painful experience. Had no one put a stop to it, he might have died.

Due to the level of his injuries, despite receiving the highest level recovery *jutsus* daily, it had taken him a month to recover.

But that was not what was important. To Kazuma, it was his first defeat.

Not in terms of the injuries he sustained.

But for giving in to despair.

Once he had understood that he could not win against the Kannagis' flames, that he would forever be a weakling, Kazuma had given up on fighting back.

He had given in to those that scorned him.

From that day forward, Kazuma had continued to run away. Not resisting, pitifully pleading for mercy, enduring endless torment, endless public humiliation.

But it no longer mattered.

Because he was no longer willing to partake of that misery.

"…I can't forget."

Kazuma realized that his memories of his past humiliations were as clear as if they had happened only yesterday and murmured to himself.

"I don't even mind."

Even though he was now in Japan once more, he had never even considered taking revenge – even though doing so would have been a painfully simple task.

To bend his pinky three centimeters; if the effort needed to kill Toru were converted to energy – that would be precisely how much would be required. Any strength Toru had gained in the last four years would be inconsequential.

(…That's odd…?)

Kazuma's train of thought was suddenly interrupted. He realized he could not picture Toru.

"Have I not seen him yet?"

Despite meeting several groups of branch family *jutsushis*, he hadn't spent any time verifying their identities, so he was unsure whether or not he had met Toru.

"…Whatever. It doesn't matter."

Pushing the question to the back of his mind, Kazuma covered himself with the covers once more. Though fully awake, he had nothing in particular to do, and didn't feel like getting up just yet.

(Let's get some more sleep…)

Alas, the heavens did not seem to agree with this unproductive decision.

Dulululululululululululu–

Kazuma glared at the ringing phone, openly displaying his irritation.

What a crafty ring. The more he tried to ignore the ringing, the more insistent it seemed to get, and yet it wasn't so loud that he would wreck the phone in frustration.

"Damn it!"

Left with no other alternative, Kazuma reached for the phone. But instead of leaving his bed for the phone, he brought the phone to him.

"…Who's making a call so early in the morning?" he grumbled in a mournful tone, despite the fact it was already late morning.

"Hello?"

He spoke in a sluggish tone – giving away the fact that he had just woken up – but his tranquil mind was pondering the courteous reply from the other end.

"Oh?"

This time, Kazuma was fully awake. There was no longer any sign of fatigue on the face that suddenly emerged from the covers.

"Today? Ah, sure. I'll be looking forward to it."

Kazuma answered politely, and then hung up. He flipped the covers back and crawled out, stretching lazily.

With his usual complacent smile now on his face, Kazuma muttered.

"Looks like it's gonna be a busy day."

Part 2

While she was walking home after school, Ayano's eyes caught a small shadow about ten meters away from her.

"Hey–"

She was just about to call out when she suddenly stopped, and a mischievous smile crept onto her face.

Ayano snuck up on the shadow slowly, step by step, it not having yet noticed Ayano's presence.

"Wh–wha!"

Standing immediately behind her target, she grabbed her victim in a bear hug, as if to envelop the entirety of the small figure. Ayano secured the youth caught in her embrace – now giving off a cute scream and struggling to escape with all his might – so that he couldn't move.

"Nee… Nee-sama?!"

"Completely off-guard. That means you still need more training, Ren."

"To say that now is really… Anyway, just let go of me first, Nee-sama!"

"No way~ Free yourself!"

Looking at the two fooling around, passersby couldn't help but crack faint, bittersweet smiles.

Judging by their appearance, the two were a rare and beautiful pair of "sisters." Though one of them only looked to be around the age of ten, they were still pleasing to the eyes.

"Nee… Nee-sama! Really…"

Realizing that they had become the center of attention, Ren's face reddened. Despite all appearances, he was, after all, a twelve-year-old boy. So, it wasn't strange for him to feel shy about female physical contact.

After finally being released from confinement, Ren demanded, "Seriously… What are you thinking?!" as he gasped for air.

However, his expression, along with wet, pleading eyes, instead generated the feeling that he was really cute, and not scary in the least. More than likely, it wouldn't have scared even a three-year-old.

"Ahahaha! Sorry. Sorry. This is a display of love for you too."

It goes without saying that Ayano was not in the least bit afraid. She patted Ren's shoulder and cheekily ignored Ren's complaints.

"Honestly!"

Unable to vent his displeasure, Ren's expression soured instantly.

This method was very effective. Because it was simply too cute, there was no way to ignore him.

"I'm really sorry. How about I treat you to a meal?"

"I won't let you change the subject."

Ren's mood showed no sign of improvement. He turned his head to the side, unwilling to meet Ayano's eyes.

Ayano used both hands to grab Ren's head and forced him to turn his face back toward her.

"If you still won't listen…

She slowly moved her face closer, almost touching his nose.

"Then I'll kiss you! ◎"

"Wahhhhhhhhhhh!!"

This was how easily Ayano toyed with the youth, who was dancing in the palm of her hand.

"Huh? So something like that happened."

On the second floor of the hamburger shop near the station, the two were chatting about the victory banquet that had happened a few days earlier.

Hearing Ren's innocent reaction, Ayano revealed an evil smirk and answered.

"Yeah, when you were asleep."

"…Geez. Don't bring that up anymore!"

Ren's cheeks flushed red. He'd been asleep that day, from beginning to end. The shock and shame of waking up on Ayano's lap showed no sign of subsiding even now.

For the first time, he truly felt what it meant to want to hide his head in the ground.

"What will I do if Father finds out about this…"

Seeing the uneasy Ren, Ayano grabbed a french fry and said with ease, "What else can you do? He already knows doesn't he? There seems to be quite a few people visiting him these few days."

Ren's father, Genma, had not participated in the battle against the Fuugas, having earlier lost to Kazuma in a quarrel between father and son, and was still resting in the hospital.

"Ahhhhhhhhh!"

Ren collapsed on the table, hugged his head, and moaned.

Genma, already very strict with himself, was even stricter with his relatives. It wasn't hard to imagine his reaction when he finally heard of his son's blunder.

"It's fine. Don't be so down."

"But I *am* 'so down.'"

Ren reproached Ayano's irresponsible remark in an incomparably downhearted voice.

"Because once Father's angry, he's really strict."

"…I guess!"

Ayano replied in a carefree tone. Whether or not he would be angry was another matter entirely. The image of an "easygoing Genma" was beyond imagination.

(Will that guy smile in front of Ren's face?)

Even though she had only ever seen him either mocking or whole-heartedly laughing.

"When the time comes, you can just place all the blame on Kazuma."

"Placing blame on someone else would only make Father even angrier."

"…That's true… He's the kind of person who's really hard to deal with."

"Awuuuuuuuuuh!"

Ren spread himself out on the table and moaned.

"Huh?"

It was a coincidence, but…

If he had been sitting upright, his view would have been blocked by protruding branches, causing the scene to have escaped his notice, but because he had collapsed on the table in despair, he instead became witness to an incredible sight.

"What is it?"

"That woman…"

Ayano lowered her head to look in the direction that Ren was indicating.

Lying directly ahead, at the edge of her field of vision, a woman was standing. A beautiful, mesmerizing woman with shiny black hair, wearing a clean, pure white coat, the starkly contrasting colors making her even more attractive.

Ayano smiled at Ren, with mischief in mind.

"What a beautiful woman. Do you know her?"

Ren ignored the implication, and muttered, “That woman, isn’t she Misao nee-sama?”

“Eh? Ehhhhhh?”

Ayano quickly looked back to inspect the woman below more closely. After a few seconds…

“It seems to be her…”

Indeed, it was Misao Ogami. However, she had changed completely from how she was three days ago. Even the simple fact that she was not wearing a kimono made her give a completely different impression. Though Ayano had known Misao ever since they were little, as far as she could remember, this was the first time that she has ever seen Misao in Western clothes.

Perhaps because of that, what could be seen of her legs extending below her coat looked exceptionally appealing.

To describe the feeling in a single word, it would be coquettish. Though normally she seemed plain, as if wanting to escape notice, now she made a magnificent impression. Actually, within the five minutes the two had been watching, there had already been three attempts to pick her up.

Misao serenely rejected their advances, and as she had showed them respect despite the rejection, all left without causing trouble. If Nanase and Yukari had seen this scene, they would have chastised Ayano, saying "Learn from her."

After staring, awestruck, for a while, Ren grumbled.

"She seems to be waiting for someone."

"That… is really surprising."

Ayano sounded as though she still could not believe her eyes because this was unimaginably different from what she had thought earlier.

"Is it a date?"

"…Is it not?"

A girl like Misao would not dress up in such an extravagant manner to meet a friend of the same gender!

Ayano's interest grew.

"I wonder who she's dating."

Inattentively sipping her orange juice, Ayano observed the scene outside the window with great interest. Given the intensity of her gaze, anyone watching from the side would have found her actions very suspicious.

"…Nee-sama."

Ren looked at Ayano, who was spying on Misao with a bitter smile. He himself turned to follow the scene outside. At that moment, the other party appeared.

"Nii-sama?!"

He couldn't help but doubt his own eyes. But it was indeed Ren's brother, Kazuma. His appearance was no coincidence – the proof being Misao, smiling broadly and running to meet him.

Before Ren, who was dumbstruck, the two intimately held hands and walked off.

Even after the two disappeared from view, Ren was still frozen, staring dumbly at the window. It was an absolutely impossible occurrence, because to Misao, Kazuma was "the man who had killed Nii-sama."

A faint sound brought Ren back to his senses.

–squish– [SFX: something being squashed]

Something light and soft was being squashed. Not a rare sound by any means, and yet hearing it fills one with unease.

Ren faced Ayano with unease. As he did not dare look directly at her, he shifted his eyes upward from below, following the table upward toward Ayano.

The first thing he saw was Ayano's hand. Her slender fingers *gripped* the paper cup, still full of juice, and crushed it into the shape of her fist. The juice spilled out, forming an orange-colored ocean. Her fries and hamburger were completely soaked and no longer worth eating.

Ayano's hand crackled – the sound of ice, unable to escape from the cup, being pulverized by her hand, which continuously trembled.

Ren was so frightened that he dared not look up.

Though he didn't understand the cause, he recognized Ayano's extreme anger. If he wasn't careful, he might just become her target.

Pak!

Suddenly, Ayano slammed her hands on the table and stood up.

"Argh!"

To the cringing Ren, Ayano said softly…

"…I'm going to follow them."

"…Huh?"

Before Ren could open his mouth, Ayano had already run out of the shop.

"Wait… Wait a minute…"

Ren hurriedly picked up their plates, and, in one go, handed them to the shop assistant lady waiting at the trash bin.

"Thank you for your patronage."

With his back to the shop assistant, who showed a professional smile, Ren swiftly ran toward the restroom.

Part 3

After waiting a minute or so, Ren ran to catch up to Ayano.

"Nee-sama?"

But by now, there was no sign of Ayano. After looking around in vain, Ren ran in the direction in which Kazuma and Misao had gone…

…and immediately discovered Ayano, whose actions made her presence immediately obvious.

"…Nee-sama…"

As a beautiful girl hiding behind an electric pole, sneakily surveying her prey, she stood out more than if she had been doing nothing at all.

For a moment, he strongly considered pretending that he didn't know her and returning home, but he only entertained the thought, unwilling to do such a thing.

Ren bravely stepped forward and walked up to Ayano, who could now be considered an exemplary example of a suspicious character.

"…Nee-sama."

"What were you doing, taking so long?"

Ren, speechless, silently took out a wet handkerchief.

"What?"

"Please clean your hands."

"Huh? Oh. Ah, thanks."

Ayano took the handkerchief and began to clean her hands, sticky from the orange juice.

"You're pretty smart, Ren."

"You're very welcome," Ren answered calmly, as he observed Kazuma and Misao, about ten meters in front of them.

The two, walking down the road with arms locked, exuded an unusually intimate atmosphere. Although they were unable to hear what the two were saying, it was easy to tell from the occasional smiles between them that there was more to their relationship.

"Don't just stand there. Hide! We'll be seen!"

Ayano grabbed Ren's hand and *pulled* him behind the pole alongside her, but no matter how you might try, it is simply impossible for an electric pole to hide two people.

"Nee-sama, do you still want to follow them?"

"Of course."

"Why?"

Faced with this candid question, Ayano was left momentarily speechless.

"Wh–What kind of question is that?!"

"Because, no matter how I look at it, they are simply on a date. What we're doing is simply prying."

Ren didn't exaggerate but simply said what he truly felt, and Ayano was deeply stung.

"Wh–What prying… I don't have such an indecent motive! I'm just…"

"Just…?"

"Just… Misao…! That's right! Misao might still intend to take Kazuma's life!"

"No matter what method she uses, she'll never beat him."

"Argh…"

Her hastily constructed excuse calmly rebutted, Ayano was left speechless once more.

"Di–Didn't you know? That guy is a sucker for beautiful women!"

"Beautiful women is it?"

"That's right! Didn't I tell you before? That guy even tried to force himself on Misao last time!" Ayano declared unashamedly, finally raising her head.

Ren pondered this for a time before blushing and asking abashedly, "So, we'll have to continue spying on those two until Misao nee-sama… until Misao nee-sama begins to use her beauty to seduce Nii-sama?"

Ayano couldn't help but visualize the scene in her mind. She pictured herself hiding in a dark corner,

watching the two as they hugged, kissed, and then continued on to the next step…

(…Maybe I kind of hate doing this…)

Thinking about these scenes not meant to be seen, Ayano felt like turning back.

At that moment, if Ren had chosen to continue to persuade her along those lines, Ayano might just have given up. Unfortunately, Ren chose another method – a method so wrong that it couldn't have been worse.

Perhaps because he thought this reason was more accurate, Ren opened his mouth to ask…

"Nee-sama, could it be that you are… jealous?"

He had no proof, just a feeling. Maybe the wish he held, that "Kazuma nii-sama and Ayano nee-sama will get along" might have been mixed in as well.

In other words, a careless statement.

"Ren…?"

Seeing a smile that could cause a child to live in eternal fear, Ren realized that he had stepped on a land mine.

(Wh–Wh–Wha?!)

This smile, that was not a smile, caught Ren like a deer caught in headlights, unable to run or even look away.

"Ah… Ah…"

"What did you just say?"

Faced with this question and the smile which, of course, did not reach her eyes, Ren could only shake his head rigidly like a robot.

Ayano reached out her hand and softly placed it on Ren's face, which was filled with fear.

"You are such a good kid. That's the way to live to a ripe, old age!"

Ren was helpless to do anything but nod.

"They're still following us."

"Yeah."

Misao said so softly and happily. Kazuma on the other hand, replied with a tired expression.

Without even needing to look, the two knew that they were being tailed – if it could have even been considered tailing.

Hiding your tracks, disguising the tail, the precise selection of following distance and position… No

matter how you looked at it, what they were doing didn't qualify as tailing. To put it bluntly, even an amateur should have done better. It almost made you want to scream that if they really wanted to hide, they should at least shut up.

(To entrust those two with the future of the Kannagis… Aren't you worried, Soushu?)

Kazuma couldn't help but sympathize with Juugo, though he never put it in words. What he was considering now was…

"What is it?"

Seeing Misao with an innocent smile, Kazuma gave her a smile in return.

"It's nothing. I was just wondering, where are you taking me?"

"We're almost there."

Given the way Misao was pulling Kazuma along, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that she was forcing him along, but Kazuma offered no resistance and followed.

(The feeling of waiting for the gallows… I guess it would be just like this!)

That's what he was thinking.

At an alley corner, Misao suddenly stopped. The place where they were was surrounded by rows of buildings, and, even in broad daylight, it seemed rather shady. Misao remained silently in place while an icy chill filled the air.

Ignoring the rapidly changing atmosphere, Kazuma calmly asked, “Is this place okay?”

“Yup. This is our destination.”

Misao answered in a firm tone, following with an exaggerated bow.

“So… I wish you luck.”

As she said those words, Kazuma’s body flew.

As if hit by an invisible car, or struck in the head by a metallic bat, his body smashed forcefully into the ground.

Several moments later, a veritable explosion of sound shook the air. As if Kazuma hadn’t even been given enough time to recognize the sound of gunfire, the body that rolled on the ground seemed powerless – like a puppet whose strings have been cut.

On the other hand, Misao wore a smile, watching as Kazuma was blown away. She slowly retreated without ever looking away.

As if swapping positions, as Misao retreated, ten men appeared from the shadows of the surrounding buildings. They wore Western suits, seemingly businessmen at first glance, but though their ethnicity and ages were all different, their teamwork was at a very high level.

They spread out in a fan-shaped formation and surrounded Kazuma – who now lay on the ground – extracting the contents of their cases in swift, practiced motions.

What lay within were not documents, or product samples, but pitch black, metallic objects, devices designed solely for killing – MP5Ks, a smaller type of MP5, an assault rifle designed for portability.

The men casually placed this thing that would not normally appear in a businessman's briefcase near their waists, as if it were only natural, and then, without hesitation, they pulled the trigger.

The bullets were fired out in full-auto, and several hundred shots crashed into Kazuma's body as one. Hit asphalt was crushed into a fine mist, staining the surroundings gray.

The men took no notice and continued to spray fire over a wide area in Kazuma's direction.

It took less than three seconds for them to run through their magazines, and they quickly inserted new clips before resuming fire.

Then this scene repeated itself once more.

When each had expended all three of their cartridges, the men swiftly took cover while something dropped from the sky at high velocity.

–BOOM–

An explosion.

The violent explosion blew away everything where it landed.

"…This way… No matter how strong that man is…"

Looking at the dusty scene of the explosion, Misao muttered to herself without emotion.

Indeed, there aren't many who could survive such an encounter. To expend close to a thousand bullets and over a dozen missiles – to call it overkill would be an understatement.

An attack that would have made you feel that the objective was not to "kill", but to "eradicate," to attack to the point that nothing remained. This was just such an attack.

She shifted her eyes slightly, seeing Ayano and Ren hugging each other on the ground.

They seemed to be too shocked to stand, but as long as the two of them were unharmed, it was fine. Even if she had already severed all ties with the Kannagis, she was unable to forget her respect for them, let alone have them as enemies.

On the other hand, in the corner where Kazuma lay, the remains of the destroyed building began to collapse, forming a small hill of concrete rubble. Even were you to search under that hill, it would have been unlikely for you to find even a scrap of cloth remaining.

"We must dig the corpse out."

Witnessing the horrifying scene before her, Misao said calmly to herself. At that moment, the men bearing the assault rifles ran out and encircled the small hill of concrete.

An awful silence loomed over the area.

"…"

Pa-chunk. [SFX: concrete shifting]

A faint sound emerged from the bottom of the small hill, slicing through the silence.

"…!"

The originally puppet-like, emotionless faces of the men seemed shaken for the first time.

A black shadow appeared from within the misty, white dust, and the sound of steady footsteps flowed forth.

"Fi–Fire!"

It was a command shouted in a voice that no longer radiated calm. Driven by fear and the voice, the men reflexively pulled the trigger.

The erupting gunfire, loud enough to cause deafness, echoed through the alley. After being hit by several hundred more bullets, the black shadow fell once more.

"…Phew…"

Someone breathed out in relief, as if released from a heavy burden. Following his lead, the other men began to relax, one by one. At that moment–

A tornado appeared.

The seemingly rampaging tornado was tightly controlled, only cutting the bodies of the ten men. Five bodies, already torn to pieces, danced in the sky. At the same time, the tornado dispersed all the dust. In the blink of an eye, the air had become unbelievably clear.

"Making such a scene, as always."

Kazuma smiled happily.

After recovering from momentary shock, Misao's face resumed its gentle smile as she looked at Kazuma.

Other than a little dirt, he had suffered no damage at all. It appeared that he had used a wind barrier to deflect everything.

Misao put her hand in her pocket as if nothing had happened and radioed a signal.

"Just to warn you, don't waste your energy," Kazuma advised Misao unhurriedly.

"The snipers are dead – both of them."

After hearing this snide comment, delivered in a matter-of-fact tone, Misao's smile vanished instantly.

In addition to the first sniper, over one kilometer away, Misao had prepared a second sniper as a trump

card. They had been placed across from each other, two kilometers apart, with Kazuma in the center.

Despite this, Kazuma had killed them. This meant that while defending against such a savage attack, he had calmly been scanning an area with a radius of at least one kilometer without missing a beat.

Though what he said was unbelievable, the radio had yet to respond. Misao offered a bitter smile and discarded her radio.

"Gee, are you a monster?"

"People often say that I am," Kazuma answered calmly.

"But for you to think of such a method–! Compared to your *en-jutsu*, modern weaponry is definitely much more effective – alas, it still isn't enough."

"So it seems. How about cruise missiles next time?"

Both of them revealed kind smiles.

At that time, the bodies of the men killed by the tornado and thrown into the sky began to rain down.

Kazuma deflected the corpses with his wind–

–KABOOM– [SFX: explosion]

Misao, on the other hand, remorselessly burned them to ash with her fire.

Seeing the corpses turn to dust, to be blown away by the wind, Kazuma asked in a low voice, "Those men were hired by you, weren't they?"

"I don't recall hiring dead people."

Misao replied while smiling.

Yes, Misao was smiling. Though the mercenaries she had hired had turned a street corner to ruin, causing death and injury to many, that smile held not a shred of insincerity.

Pure and innocent, a smile to be pitied – the smile of someone who has crossed a line that should never be crossed, the smile of someone on the wrong path.

"You've changed Misao… Was I the cause…?" Kazuma asked, in a rare, pained tone.

"I changed? Did you know me that well?"

"…That's true."

Kazuma waved away his sorrow, reverting to a cold expression.

"So, your plan ends here?"

"Yes, that's all for today."

"Is that so? You may go then."

Hearing these words, Misao was slightly shocked.

"Is it really okay to just let me go?"

"I've said this before. No matter what method you try, you'll never be able to even scratch me."

"You'll regret it."

"Let's wait and see."

Misao didn't reply and silently turned to leave.

Seeing the shadow of her back fade away in the distance, Kazuma sighed softly.

"Ten years… is really a long time…"

His quiet words passed unheard and disappeared into the wind.

Part 4

"Gunfire broke out at 4pm today in an incident in Chiyoda Ward, Kudankita District, and claimed more than 30 lives."

The nightly news was reporting on the earlier incident, which was only to be expected. Even though the legend of Japanese security had already long since broken down, things had yet to reach the point where a firefight in the center of Tokyo was a common occurrence.

Because the incident had taken place near the royal residence, all of Tokyo had instantly gone on high alert. As if under martial law, police could be seen everywhere.

Pointing at the ruinous street corner appearing on the television, Juugo showed Ayano a look of suspicion.

"You are saying that *all of this* is Misao's doing?"

"Yes… Umm… It should be…"

Ayano answered hesitantly. The more she looked at the scene depicted on the television, the less real it seemed.

Regardless of the circumstances, the Misao the two of them knew would never be associated with such an incident. Normally a very sympathetic girl, even were she to hold a grudge, she would never be so cruel as to involve innocent people. And were she to decide to take revenge, she would choose a method that wouldn't involve others.

But…

"For an obedient, docile girl like Misao… Once she gets angry, her actions are surprisingly audacious…" Ayano mumbled wholeheartedly.

From speaking with Masayuki, they had learned that Misao had already disappeared two days prior, along with an eight digit sum from the Ogami family account.

It went without saying that she had yet to be seen again.

"Don't look as though this doesn't concern you. Why didn't you grab her on the spot?"

"Because, Kazuma… He–"

In response to Juugo's reprimand, Ayano responded coquettishly.

"No excuses. After all, you are to be the next Soushu."

(Just what do you expect me to do in that kind of situation…)

Ayano put on an obedient front in the face of Juugo's lecture, but the earlier incident was replaying itself within her.

"Ugh, I can't hear a thing."

With Kazuma's safe return, and the subsequent exit of his assailants, Ayano had become a stalker once more, but the distance between them was too large, and she had been unable to listen in.

At such times, *en-jutsu* was useless. Among the various forms of *en-jutsu* – which exhibited an overwhelming attack power – there was nothing that could be used for reconnaissance.

In the end, Ayano didn't manage to catch even a single word of the conversation.

"That guy seems to be enjoying himself."

"Is that so? He looks pained to me."

"Pained? That guy? What a joyous occasion."

"Nee-sama…"

The reason why Ayano could have such an attitude was because she thought that it was all over.

She believed that Misao had no cards left to play and that all that was left was the aftermath. Or so she thought.

Unfortunately…

After the conversation had come to a peaceful resolution, Misao had turned, not to run away, but to calmly walk away.

Kazuma didn't give chase and just silently watched as she took her leave.

In the moments during which Ayano was too stunned to move, Misao had leisurely disappeared.

"Wa–Wait a minute!"

Coming back to her senses, Ayano ran to Kazuma's side and grabbed his collar.

"Why did you let her escape?!"

"Why should I capture her?"

Kazuma didn't seem surprised by Ayano's appearance and questioned her in turn, as if only natural.

"What do you mean why… This incident was caused by Misao!"

"From the way I see it, they're the ones responsible."

In response to Ayano, who was pointing at the remains of the building, Kazuma pointed instead at the corpses of the fallen men.

"That's what I'm saying! They were following her orders!"

"Is that so? That's news to me."

"Yo–You really…"

The hand gripping his collar increased in force. From her attitude it was plain to see that what Ayano really wanted to grab was Kazuma's throat.

"If you let her be, Misao will do the same thing again!"

"Does it matter? There wasn't any harm done anyway."

"Are you blind?"

Ayano once again pointed to the pathetic scene behind her.

After a brief moment of contemplation, Kazuma corrected himself.

"No harm to me."

Pachi.

"You bastard! Just stand there and receive your punishment!"

A flaming fist (Note: not a metaphor) struck at Kazuma. Dodging the strike with ease, Kazuma began to chat with his brother, who walked up to him.

"Oh, Ren. How've you been?"

"Well…"

"Damn it! Die! Die this instant!"

"How noisy!"

Kazuma closed the distance as Ayano drew her fist, and lightly twisted her right hand upward.

"Gya!"

Ayano's elbow was flipped up, and the joints in her arm, elbow, and shoulder were all stretched to the limit at the same time. In such a condition, Ayano could only arc her body, tip-toe and bear with it. Her body completly lost balance, and all she could do was surrender.

"Ugh…"

Ignoring Ayano, who was trying her best to recover her balance, Kazuma warned Ren, "I'm heading back. You guys should leave too. It'll be troublesome if the police see you."

"See ya then."

He carelessly waved his hand and swept his eyes toward Ayano – who was now stumbling on the ground – with an expression of victory.

"Yo–You!"

With his back to Ayano, who was glaring at him, Kazuma walked away.

"Nee-sama, are you okay?"

Treating Ren's words of concern with the regard she would give a gust of wind, Ayano silently watched Kazuma's back.

(That guy–! One day I'll definitely teach him a lesson!)

Ayano forgot that she was listening to her father lecture her and grew angry at the thought.

Juugo did not fail to notice. When he saw that Ayano was not paying attention, he stood up – Ayano showed no reaction – walked forward – Ayano still didn't react – and knocked his fist on the top of her head.

Dong!

An extremely exaggerated sound came forth. Ayano was in such pain that she couldn't even scream, and her entire body collapsed on the tatami.

Having suffered the blow on the top of her head while kneeling, the impact had nowhere to go but straight down. Agonizing under a blow that seemed as if it would crush her skull, Ayano could only endure it.

"I… I object to violence…" Ayano protested with tears in her eyes.

"Don't just say the words. *Change*."

Juugo, of course, ignored her protest.

"It seems that I've spoiled you too much in the past. I will have to be more strict from now on."

"But that's…"

Disregarding Ayano's pitiful expression, Juugo returned to the topic at hand.

"So? Did you notice any other clues?"

"Kazuma is very suspicious!" Ayano shouted at almost exactly the same time.

"…"

Juugo simply looked at Ayano without saying a word. To call his gaze critical would have been conservative.

"…Is that all?"

"Be… Because it's weird, isn't it?! Why didn't Kazuma kill Misao?!"

"Hmm…"

Juugo grew silent, not speaking a word. Seizing this opportunity, Ayano pressed on.

"Otou-sama, just think about it. Doesn't Kazuma resent the Kannagis to the core? To not even kill a single person up until now, it just seems too weird."

"He seems to have told Ren that he 'no longer hates the Kannagi family'."

"Who knows? Even if that's true, if someone took the initiative to attack him, that shouldn't still be the case. Didn't we see it already? The fourteen or fifteen men who surrounded and attacked him, he beat them to a pulp. That's Kazuma's 'usual' way of doing things."

"…Mm-hmm…"

Juugo nodded. He had no objections to her point.

"But in that case, why didn't he lay a hand on Misao?"

"I have no idea. But anyone can see that Misao is very special in Kazuma's eyes. There must be something between them," Ayano said bluntly, with a stern, or rather, sharp expression.

"He has fallen in love with Misao?"

Ayano's body trembled slightly. She looked at her father with the unsure eyes of a lost child.

"Otou-sama thinks so too?"

"Who knows?"

Juugo answered vaguely. He hoped that he was just thinking too much.

(Kazuma must return to the Kannagis. But Misao is unable to be his support.)

To say that he did not expect Kazuma to replace the Fuugas would have been a lie. In addition, Juugo had not forgotten the danger Kazuma posed.

Kazuma had shown his scars once before. Juugo couldn't pretend not to have seen that unhealed wound.

(Kazuma needs a place to return to. And for that…)

Juugo looked at Ayano with eyes that held deep meaning, but at that moment, Ayano was too focused on her own troubles and failed to notice those eyes at all.

"Anyway, let's find Kazuma and ask him about it first."

Ayano returned to her senses and nodded in agreement.

"Ye… Yeah… By the way, why is that guy always so mysterious?"

"Indeed."

Juugo gave a bitter smile. He felt uneasy precisely because he understood that it was due to Kazuma's mistrust of the Kannagis.

"Somehow, we must find a way…"

In the end, Juugo never got a chance to ask Kazuma about the circumstances between him and Misao. And by that point, the opportunity had already long passed.

Chapter 3: Friendship – Contributions and Mistakes

Part 1

Late night…

"Dammit! I'm not sure if I'll make it in time."

A teenager rushed towards the station in order to catch the last train.

Takahashi Shuuji was a 20 year-old university student.

As a formal participant of the Kendo club, his slender-seeming body was actually very well trained—there was no fat on it at all.

His reflexes were benumbed due to an excessive intake of alcohol. Even so, the steps he took on the brick floor did not seem so disordered.

"…That's weird."

Shuuji suddenly had a strange feeling. He stopped in his tracks to look around him.

He found nothing suspicious—just a very normal underground passage that stretched a long way.

But—

"Hey… Why is there no one here?"

Besides him, not a single soul could be seen in the area.

This was the underground passage to the turnstiles. Even with it past midnight—the time when the last train was about to reach the station—it was impossible that there was nobody here at all.

"Rea— Really, anything can happen."

Shuuji found some excuse to convince himself and tried to suppress the uneasiness in his heart.

"I'm… I'm going to miss the train at this rate…"

Shuuji began to walk quickly with a loud and clear *ta! ta! ta!* sound from his footsteps, . After a while it became a jog—and in the end he ran at full speed, as if he was flying.

Ta! Ta! Ta!

The sound made by the soles of his leather shoes knocking against the brick floor echoed throughout the entire vacant underground passage. Yet, no matter how long he continued to walk, there was no sign of the turnstiles before him.

"Wha—? What the hell!? It shouldn't be this long at all!"

The underground passage seemed to stretch on endlessly. Surrounded by store windows with the metal shutters pulled down at the sides, Shuuji gradually lost track of where he was.

He turned back to check on the way he came.

"—Eek!"

Shuuji gasped. Before him was a long tunnel that led to who knows where. The stairs that led to the surface could no longer be seen.

"—!"

He changed his direction once more and continued in the direction in which he had first been going. The scene reflected in his eyes made Shuuji stare, his eyes wide open.

The same as the way behind him—there was only one tunnel that stretched until it vanished as far as he can see. Of course, there were no stairs or crossroads there either.

Shuuji was stranded in the middle of a tunnel that stretched endlessly—alone.

"What…? What's going on…?"

Cold sweat broke out from his face. Within the eyeballs that spun continuously, his pupils slowly dilated.

"What the hell is this about?!"

No one replied to his scream. His cry reverberated between the walls and ceiling and got sent back into Shuuji's ears as a reverberating echo.

The teenager stumbled onto the floor, staring blankly at the brick with half mad, half sane eyes.

"…Ah?"

Suddenly, his eyes focused on one point—something was seeping through the gaps between the bricks on the floor.

"What…?"

It was a semi-transparent substance with a glue-like texture. It was originally the size of a ping-pong ball, then, it grew to the size of a baseball in a moment, and, after not too long, it was the size of a soccer ball.

The glue-like substance shone with a rainbow-colored glow. If this thing was seen in a photo, maybe it would give a clear, lustrous, and refreshing feeling.

But, the actual substance floating before his eyes could only be described as ugly. It was just like a tu-

mor, vomit, or a filthy gooey piece of the two condensed to the maximum limit.

Instinctively, Shuuji hurriedly jumped backwards, reacting to his disgust. He jumped with force, landing two meters behind where he was, and the sound of his steps spreads across the entire underground passage.

Squeelch.

"—!?"

He looked down at his feet in shock. There—! No, as far as he can see, all of the brick was covered with the filthy pieces of goo.

"WA—! WAHHHH!"

The globules that were in contact from under his feet slowly latched onto Shuuji's body. Even though he attempted to peel the gooey things off, he couldn't; they were tougher than expected, firmly attaching themselves onto his limbs.

"…Huh?"

All of a sudden, his surroundings darkened. His eyeballs almost popped out, when he looked up away from the area near his feet he was staring at.

Before his eyes— At a distance so close he could touch it by stretching out his hand, a wall made from the globules appeared.

The scattered globules on the floor gathered around Shuuji, forming a semi-transparent, round bucket. Looking at the round bucket emitting a lustrous glow, it looked like a distorted pillar, like an avant-garde piece of art.

"…*Argh*… *Ah*…"

Shuuji shook his head, unwilling to believe what was happening. In his mind, he tried hard to deny the existence of this gooey mass.

However, his wish was not fulfilled.

At that moment, the globules, which were stacked even higher than his body, collapsed on him all at once.

"—!"

Shuuji was too scared to say anything as his whole body was completely wrapped within the blob.

Unable to withstand such a chilling experience, sending shivers down his spine, Shuuji's consciousness was consumed by darkness.

And— He never woke up again.

"The way you manipulated them left me speechless, but—"

In the space where there was no one originally, a boy's clear voice spoke up.

"Don't you think you wasted too much time?"

A gentle female voice replied, "This is the first time; naturally I had to be more cautious."

"Hmm, maybe!"

Ka-ta. The sound of one footstep could be heard.

Who could say when they were there? Two shadows suddenly appeared in the abnormal space that trapped Shuuji.

There stood a seventeen or eighteen-year-old female with a boy about ten years old. The girl's height exceeded that of the boy by about thirty centimeters—but, as for the position of the head, the boy's head was slightly higher.

The two looked at Shuuji, who was trapped in the globule, chatting calmly.

"But, if you use so much time like this, who knows when it will be completed? To fulfill your wish, more power must be gathered."

Right before the two of them, Shuuji slowly became emaciated.

He was being consumed.

Was it his blood—? No.

Was it his moisture content—? That was wrong too.

Being surrounded by the blob, Shuuji aged rapidly. All the vital essence of the teenager's whole body—The radiance of life was being expropriated, his life that should last over half a century was used to its limit within a short period of a few minutes.

"I understand this very clearly! I will do it more cleanly and quickly next time!"

The girl raised her head to look at the boy, and used a determined tone to reply. As if to pacify the displeased girl, the boy gave a light smile.

"That's the way. You can do it."

The short, neatly-cut golden hair waved lightly to follow his nodding motion.

Judging from the tone the two spoke in, it seemed the young boy was of a higher status.

Maybe his actual age was not as young as his appearance—the emerald-green eyes that looked inno-

cent and naïve at first sight instead seemed deep beyond comprehension.

In a clear melodious voice like a silver bell, the boy said solemnly:

"Because he who is right will receive Heaven's protection."

"…You mean this?"

Looking at the vital essence of the innocent teenager being continuously sucked dry by the blob, the girl laughed mockingly.

"You're saying that this monster is the same as you? *Tenshi*-sama? That sounds awful."

The boy had no wings. A faint radiance emitted from all over his body as he floated in the air. The beautiful angelic face of his showed a bitter smile.

"Needless to say monsters—even devils—cannot escape the grasp of God. Because the omnipotent God is capable of anything."

The girl looked at the smiling angel (self-proclaimed) with puzzled eyes. However, she did not reject his extended hand.

"No matter what your reason may be, I'm very thankful that you lent me power. For mutual benefit, let us work together from now on!"

"—One day, you will surely experience the love of God, too."

Before the teenager gradually withering away, two hands filled with personal desires and hypocrisy were tightly clasped.

Part 2

Next day at the Kannagi residence:

"What's the matter?"

Kazuma—who was sought out—suddenly decided to forgo the pleasantries to ask Juugo directly.

He didn't even glance at Ayano who was sitting at his side.

Ayano, as usual, was in a silent anger. Kazuma, as usual, ignored her presence and kept his gaze on Juugo only.

"From yesterday night up till this morning at zero hours, Ikebukoro has a total of eight youngsters dying from being weakened by an unknown reason, their age ranging from ten plus to twenty plus years old."

Juugo matched himself with Kazuma, going to the main point directly.

"And so?"

Kazuma calmly hushed for his continuation. He had an extremely high tolerance towards the suffering and misfortunes of others.

Even though you could just say how he was without blood or tears.

"They seem to have their vigor sucked dry. And so, I would like to ask you to find this person, and, if possible, eliminate him."

"Okay, I got it."

Without a more detailed negotiation, Kazuma accepted the request readily. This, too, was his usual style.

"I leave it to you. This is the data related to the incidents…"

With that said, Juugo takes out a thin sheaf of documents. Even though they were said to be data, but the incidents only happened last night, so there were no important clues. Just simple data about the victims and where they were found, and some photos while they were still alive, and some after their death.

"Oh oh… These are just like residues."

Kazuma compared the photos, and says the term that would make the relatives of the deceased curse him.

Yet, this was probably the most direct thought of anyone who saw the photos— Even though there were not many who dared say it out loud.

Every victim looked very lively—just looking at their photos allowed one to feel the brilliance of their lives.

Switching back to their photos after death… To be frank, they were mummies. Nothing would seem out of place even if they were placed directly in a museum for exhibition.

Dry and wrinkled skin, faces filled with wrinkles. In those open and vacant eyes, there was no sign of fear, only just a supernatural calmness.

Even if you told everyone how they had been still alive a few hours ago, there wouldn't be many who would believe you! That was just how bad they looked after death.

"This time there is no time limit—but act fast. You will co-operate with Ayano—"

Kazuma simply cut into Juugo's sentence. "No need."

"—What?"

"She'll just be in my way."

Faced with Juugo's question, Kazuma replied coldly.

"Wha—? What!?"

Ayano furiously cried out in protest. Juugo stopped her.

"—Kazuma."

He called out Kazuma's name like a sigh—but Kazuma showed no intention of backing off.

"The job this time is primarily to search—right? Then *En-jutsushi* are completely useless. If the opponent is not something I can handle, I'll contact you guys again. Until then, just remain on stand-by!"

"But, if the enemy escapes because of this, then we'll have to go through this trouble again."

Juugo didn't give up, and persistently attempted to let Ayano travel along. Kazuma refused once more.

"I doubt that the number of *Youma* that I cannot handle by myself is very high. So why should I bring a heavy burden to prevent such a situation?"

Ayano jumped up in her anger. "Burden—!? Aren't you being too arrogant—!?"

Juugo restrained Ayano and pulled her back to her seat.

"You won't bring her along no matter what?"

"Nope."

"…Is that so?"

Under such a direct rejection, Juugo could only comply.

“I get it. I’ll trust you on this, then. And one more thing—”

“What is it?”

“You seem to care a lot about Misao. But, for now, just forget about her! At least until this matter is over.”

“—”

Kazuma made no reply. He stood up silently, turned and left the room.

"You idiot—! Even if you come back crying, begging me, *I will definitely not help you—!*"

Ayano raged at Kazuma's back as he gradually left.

Juugo looked at his daughter bitterly with a deep sigh.

"You should at least…"

"What!? You think I'm in the wrong?"

The ignorant Ayano said in a temper.

Slice!

Wind blades sped through to slice a bunch of eerily wriggling blobs into pieces. Staring at the semi-transparent objects turned into crumbs, Kazuma breathed out.

"Gee, another failure."

Two days had passed since he had taken on Juugo's request.

During this period, he had been assaulted by these *youma* as many as nine times.

They didn't seem to consider Kazuma a target. Even though he himself walked into these areas with a strong *youki*, meeting them was sheer coincidence.

Nine times.

A very abnormal number.

And while he investigated, every day there were another five or six victims…

Five or six? I doubt there were so few.

Indeed, such was only the number of corpses which had been found. But after witnessing how a victim was devoured from start to finish, Kazuma realized that Juugo's assumption was wrong.

This type of "youma" didn't just absorb its victim's vigor. It also ate their flesh as well as anything else it swallowed up—including clothes and accessories. Everything got devoured.

Kazuma looked dejectedly at the victim, whose skin was now dissolving. This was followed by the flesh until in the end even his bones had dissolved. Kazuma's expression was not due to the dissolution process being so gruesome, but because he understood what this meant.

—The only reason why corpses remained was because it couldn't digest them completely.

The estimated number of casualties might be off from the actual number by a digit—or even two.

"No way…"

Kazuma sighed weakly.

Just how many more shape-shifting worms that fed on human flesh resided within Tokyo city? Just thinking about it irritated him.

"There's no end to this… I'd better come up with a way —and fast—to get to the core of this and end it once and for all!"

After nine battles, Kazuma almost completely understood the characteristics of these *youma.*

Their appearance was similar to a single cell organism, with no intelligence at all. They acted purely by instinct, continuously devouring humans filled with vigor.

Their ability was "Absorption"—to completely drain away one's vigor. Even the bodies were converted to energy and taken in.

Alone, they posed a threat no different from any normal pest. But what was troubling was that their

numbers were not few as was normal—and when they joined up they gained new abilities.

When enough of them had gathered, some kind of magical circuit would then form among them. Using this circuit to create a *kekkai,* they made it so that the targeted humans were unable to escape.

Kazuma predicted that these globules all together were just one entity. The situation now was like that of split cells conducting activities independently.

The ability of each "cell" was to absorb calories and then exhaust them through activity. When they gathered together to form an "organ," they gained the ability to control the energy they absorbed.

Perhaps in the final stage, each "organ" would link up to form one entity. But Kazuma didn't care about the true identity of this monster.

If it was just one entity, then there must be an organ like a brain giving out commands… Something like a core. Things would be fine so long as he found this core and destroyed it.

Currently, the enemy was acting separately, and thus its powers were weakened. There was no reason not to strike during this opportunity. He didn't have

strange habits such as "hoping to fight with strong enemies."

As such, Kazuma had been trying to find clues from the "cells" that would lead him to where the core might be, trying to find the real enemy… But so far it was nine consecutive losses.

"These guys are too dispersed. Some bait must be used in order to get them to gather in one place…"

Kazuma suddenly went quiet.

Bait. Someone full of vigor.

"There just so happens to be one available."

Just as he clapped in exultation at having come up with such a brilliant plan, Kazuma sensed the appearance of the tenth batch of *youma*. At the same time, he noticed the presence of a certain someone he knew.

Kazuma's smile was arrogant.

"*Hehe*. Not bad. Without my needing to say anything, our bait took up its role already."

Listening to the wind, he identified the exact location.

"A little far… Should I jump?"

Jumping in the city might be seen by others. Kazuma's eyes subconsciously turned to the road

while he pondered. His ears and eyes noticed "it" at the same time.

Okay. Let's use that.

Kazuma made up his mind immediately. He hopped over the protective railing and stood in the road. Following that, with his left leg as the center, he spun round once to pass the side of a motorcycle that sped through the sidewalk…

"Wha—!?"

The reverse spin kick swept at the neck of the rider.

While the rider was thrown off the motorcycle and still in mid-air, Kazuma—as if doing a magic trick—straddled the motorcycle.

Thunk!

A blunt and heavy sound came from behind. It seemed the driver fell head first onto the ground—but since he was wearing a helmet, he wouldn't die at that kind of speed.

"I will try my best to return it to you."

Kazuma muttered with his greatest sincerity—and then suavely sped off.

Part 3

"Hey you girls, wanna—"

Bang!

The poor guy didn't know how to look at the situation. Before he even completed his first sentence, he was sent flying into the air by the schoolbag that flew in from the side.

"Scram!"

Ayano yelled. His companions, seeing this, abandoned the unconscious man and instantly ran off. This was probably the most loyal and clever judgment made by self-survival instincts!

Yukari and Nanase did not rebut a single word all along; they knew better than anyone it wouldn't be a wise move.

The massive crowds all around the front of Ikebukuro station made it difficult for anyone to move on in a straight line—yet no one blocked Ayano's way.

Like Moses who split the red sea in two, Ayano walked boldly on the path cleared right in the middle of the crowd.

What was that!? What was that!? Sorry I'll only be a nuisance! Too bad I'm weaker than you! Gee, I'm so sorry—!

In her heart, Ayano used her *Enraiha* to stab that flippant detestable face.

Yet, no matter how she mashed or beat up that face, the fury in her showed no signs of abating.

"*Erm*… Ayano?"

"What is it?"

Ayano looked back at Yukari with scary eyes that would even scare a yakuza. But when she saw Yukari retreat back in fear, she reflected on her own behavior.

"Give me a moment."

Ayano turned her back on the two and took in a few deep breaths. After she finally managed to give a relaxed expression, she turned back at them, wearing a smile once more.

"What's wrong?"

"*Ah, erm*… We took the wrong way."

"—*Huh?*"

Ayano looked around her, just to realize that this place seemed very unfamiliar to her.

"Where is this?"

"A small path by the main road."

It seemed that because Ayano was walking without watching her way up till now, they had unknowingly walked into a separate road.

Even though this was a completely new place to them, they could still see the Tokyu Hands sign ahead. Apparently they hadn't strayed too far.

"*Ahaha*— Sorry, sorry. I was thinking about something."

"Geez, this will not do— You should pay attention when you walk."

Ayano gave an embarrassed smile. And Yukari smiled back at an appropriate time, lifting her hand to poke her forehead to lighten the mood.

"But, it's just one street away. Why did it become so empty suddenly?"

Ayano who didn't know too much about Ikebukuro said.

As she said, in this alleyway sandwiched between a car park and a love motel, there were just the three of them—no one else.

"Yeah… There's no one around…"

This place shouldn't be so empty to have no one at all.

It was just like having a gap that suddenly appeared amidst the noisy city; the silence made one feel an unimaginable uneasiness.

"This kind of situation happens once in a while I guess. Today's not a holiday after all."

As if trying to dispel the gloomy atmosphere, Nanase said confidently.

"Yeah, that's right…"

"Alright, let's go. Ayano too…"

At the instant she looked at Ayano, Nanase's eyes opened wide.

"Nanase…?"

Yukari looked in the direction of Nanase's line of sight; her face also went stiff. An expression of a pale bloodless face filled with fear.

"Aww, don't be like that—there's no need to be so afraid. I won't scare you guys again."

"Behind you!"

Nanase shouted out in a rare tone of panic. When Ayano heard it she stopped smiling and turned her whole body around.

"—!?"

Her heart almost jumped out from her throat.

Because that kind of thing was less than a meter away from her.

A semi-transparent and continuously wriggling piece of goo. It looked like a slime from an RPG, but Ayano clearly knew it wasn't something cute.

She ignored the eyes of the other two. Under an instinctive feeling of detest and irritation, Ayano released the flames.

—*Kaboom!*

The golden flames burnt the goo till there was no trace of it left.

"That… That was scary…"

What a dangerous moment that was. If she were killed like this, it would probably be told to generations to come as the biggest humiliation of the Kannagi clan.

No matter how slow and pathetic the senses of a *En-jutsushi* may be, no matter how his attention was focused on other things, to be completely unaware of an abnormality that even a normal person would real-

ize like just now was, without question, the biggest disgrace of all.

I mustn't let others know of this…

Ayano silently swore to bury this deep in her heart for the rest of her life.

"A—Ayano… What was that just now…?"

"That's… That's a good question… I just saw a weird thing pop out, and then it suddenly caught fire…"

Ayano acted as though she knew nothing.

"Anyway, we better get out of this creepy place!"

She changed the topic immediately.

But Ayano had already sensed things were not that simple.

This is not good… This place is not Ikebukuro at all… Can we get out…?

All kinds of noise spread from the road just one street away. Yet this several tens of meters of distance was now even further away than the moon.

"A—Ayano, that!"

"*Ah*—Yeah."

Ayano sensed it without even having to look at the thing Yukari pointed at.

Oozing continuously from all the gaps and cracks emerged a large mass of slime.

Not just from the sewer openings and water drains, the more exaggerating ones would be that they are coming out from the dispensing ports of automated selling machines, and from within the mailboxes.

The total number was countless.

"Those… Those are—!? What the hell are these things!?"

"Calm down, Yukari."

Ayano observed Nanase while she comforted Yukari who was out of control.

Nanase's face, normally calm and fearless, looked slightly distorted, but not to a large extent.

"Let me see— We should make a run for it first!"

Her mind was very clear despite how bad their situation was. As the opponent seemed to look very slow and clumsy, they should be able to escape easily.

So Nanase was indeed stunned as the globules all leaped at them. Who would have imagined that slimes could perform an amazing leap of over ten meters on the spot?

—Oh shit!

Ayano reflexively stimulated the power in her body. She placed her right hand at her left hip, and then, as she made one big step forward, she slashed horizontally out.

This was the posture of a *battoujutsu* without the blade. Yet there was indeed a blade that appeared there.

It was a bright crimson-red, double-edged straight sword. A golden flame possessing a shining and brilliant great power engulfed the blade.

Enraiha— The demon-slaying holy blade bestowed by the Lord of the Fire Spirits. The devastating flames that burst out from the blade burned all the "youma" in sight into a crisp.

"Phew—"

Breathing out softly, Ayano began to verify the safety of the two.

The two people before her were still in a state of extreme fear.

"It's okay now—don't be afraid."

Ayano wore a smile and took a step towards the two.

Yukari retreated three steps.

"Yukari…?"

Ayano only realized that what the two are afraid of now, was none other than herself.

Even Nanase, who tried her best to stand there, the fear on her face was plain to see.

"Ayano… Just what are you…?"

"—!"

Ayano hid the *Enraiha* behind her immediately—but it was pointless doing so now.

What… What should I do…?

She didn't feel ashamed of her powers, but instead she was very proud of them.

Even so, the fearful eyes that her best friends placed on her made her feel very painful.

It was not strange that the two would be afraid of Ayano. But, it was a kind of fear towards "a scary person".

By now these two people had classified Ayano as "a scary person". To them Ayano was the same as those blobs.

"N—No… I…"

The moment she opened her mouth, the expression of the two flinched. Seeing their expressions, Ayano

understood it was pointless no matter how she tried to explain herself. She shut her mouth.

She couldn't face them; she lowered her head, her body trembling lightly. As she lost her will, the flames vanished from the blade of *Enraiha*.

"—Behind you!"

Nanase's warning sounded off once more. Yet, Ayano had no strength to respond to her voice.

Behind Ayano who stood there emptily, a big lump of slime wriggled inexorably closer.

The blob that collapsed from above her head swallowed Ayano in the blink of an eye.

"—Is this the place?'

Kazuma muttered after parking the motorcycle he borrowed.

Attracted by Ayano's vigor, a large group of *youma* gathered here at one go. This would allow him to be able to conduct a reverse investigation.

"Good job, Ayano— *Hmm?*"

After nodding proudly, Kazuma finally realized something was amiss.

Ayano's scent was very weak, and was surrounded by *youma*—or should it be said that she was swallowed within.

"Even if you are the bait, there's no need to go to such an extent! What is this girl doing?"

Kazuma knew very clearly how powerful this kind of *youma* was. Even if their numbers filled up the entire Tokyo Dome, it would be impossible for Ayano to lose.

However, Ayano was now being swallowed up.

"Gee, what a trouble-maker—"

Kazuma grumbled unhappily. He stepped onto the motorcycle and flew off into the sky. He remained motionless in the air, and began to observe the inside of the *kekkai*.

Even though it was only as thick as a piece of thin skin, but it was a space completely isolated from the real world. There was no way to get there through physical means.

Of course, it was the same for the wind.

A natural phenomenon like the wind could only operate revolving around the same world; it was unable to affect other worlds. If there was a wall that could

be broken, it might still be possible—but there was no way to affect a space of a different dimension.

—That was the case for a "natural phenomenon."

Kazuma raised his right hand towards the sky. A large number of wind spirits responded to Kazuma's summon, and gathered consistently.

In terms of spirit techniques, it was not just simply controlling a natural phenomenon. Using the phenomenon as a medium, so that his will could manifest in this world was the quintessence of it.

Imagining the edges of the abnormal space, Kazuma input the power into the wind to break that space.

From directly above it he took the thin and sharp "will" he made—

"Gah!"

—And fired it!

The raging wind broke the dimensional gap.

Part 4

"I thought that it was the descent of God."

Yukari said so after the incident.

This is the first time she felt the beauty of a powerful person.

Bringing forth the winds, an embodiment of great power descending suavely. That scene was reflected in Yukari's eyes.

An invisible force that came from the skies crushed the gigantic "youma" in one blow.

Ayano rolls out from within that "youma" like a puppet. The amazing thing is, she did not suffer any injuries, not just that, there is not a single piece of goo sticking onto her.

This is the power of "purification" that only destroys demons— The special demon slaying power that the Kannagi is so proud of.

"… Cough… Cough cough!"

He uses a cold gaze to stare at the girl who is coughing vigorously to try to breathe, and orders her strictly..

"Stand up."

(… What is she doing?)

After he clears off all the wriggling pieces of goo, Kazuma observes Ayano once more.

Her "ki" is unbelievably weak. The amount of vigor that was absorbed by the low level "youma" isn't that much, yet she seems so expended she is like an average person.

"… Kazuma?"

The pathetic way she lies on the floor, looking at him dumbly made him feel very displeased. Not a single shred of her usual dominance could be felt from her, her expression looks as nervous and uneasy as an abandoned puppy.

(Just what has she been doing since just now?)

"Stand up."

He uses a pressurizing tone to command her. Even so, Ayano still showed some form of resistance. She obeys the command, using Enraiha as a crutch, she slowly stands up.

Against that pair of cold eyes that is staring right into her, Ayano does not dare face it. All that can be

seen is how she peeks behind Kazuma's right hand from time to time.

Of course, Kazuma noticed that there are two people there. Judging from how they wear the same uniform as Ayano, they are probably not people who are just passing by so coincidentally.

"Erm… Err… This is…"

Ayano's gaze shifts between Enraiha and the two girls, who are standing there blankly, continuously. Just looking at her now, in his heart, Kazuma guessed pretty much what this is about.

(Gee…)

He stretches one finger out between Ayano's eyes. The eyes that were originally busy shifting around, was captivated by the finger that appeared suddenly before her.

While Ayano's conscious is still focused on the finger, Kazuma shouts loudly..

" "Thou who hast been blessed by the spirits, where does thy power lie?" " [or more literally: People who receives the blessings of spirits, what is your power used for? In a more olden days context, similar to the ones used by Horo in S&W]

That is a pledge— and an article during sermons. This is the most basic pledge that spirit standard Jutsushis act upon.

Ever since Ayano was little, Juugo has been repeating this sentence continuously. Even if she is completely out of it, she still remembers clearly the line that follows.

"My… "My power lies to protect. As a ministrant of the spirits, to slay the demons in this world, to uphold the truth is where my duty lies. Never to be forgotten—" "

Suddenly, her tense speech stopped.

Ayano, whose eyes are focused at Kazuma's fingertip, as if shocked by electricity, she lifts her head up to stare at Kazuma. Those eyes glow with a light of understanding.

She shifts her eyes to the side, looking at Yukari and Nanase. And finally downwards— At the Enraiha that is in her right hand.

Ayano grabs the hilt that was originally hanging at her fingertips tightly.

When she raised her head up once more, the lost looks she had earlier has already vanished without a

trace. Ayano uses her words to reinforce that pledge all over again.

"To protect— The people I love!"

A dazzling flame bursts out from Enraiha. That is no longer an injured girl. Understanding the meaning of power, the duty that she bears, as a powerful En-Jutsushi, she stares right back at Kazuma's eyes.

Kazuma shows a smile at his lips, and stretches a finger to poke Ayano's forehead gently. Pak! Ayano's head tilts backwards.

"Ahhh!? What are you doing, don't do that—"

Ignoring Ayano who bloats her cheek and complains, Kazuma places his attention on the surroundings.

Unsure whether it is the self-regeneration of the remaining goo or a new batch emerging out, by now, countless goo pieces are surrounding them.

"So then—"

Not asking if she "can do it?" or "are you okay?", that level of injury, there is no need to show solicitude. To put it more plainly, it is the level of it does not matter at all.

Because, the power they have exists precisely for this.

"I leave those at the back to you."

"Leave it to me."

Ayano replies without hesitation. The two walk out back-to-back at the same time.

"— Kazuma."

He did not answer, but he stopped in his steps.

"Thank you."

Still, there was no answer. Only sounds of silent footsteps ring by her ears.

Ayano closes her eyes gently, trying her best to remember what she needs to do.

(Yukari, Nanase… Farewell…)

It would be a lie to say that she doesn't feel lonely or sad. But even so—

(Even so, I must protect everyone—)

She opens her eyes. There is not a single trace of gloominess or darkness in that pure and clear mind.

An explosion sounds off, golden flames bursts from all over her body. Inputting all of her upsurge of powers—-

"Gahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Under a sharp scream, Ayano swung her Enraiha.

"Looking quite good—"

His back filled with explosive "ki", Kazuma can't help but give a bitter smile.

At this rate, these monsters will not be able to hold out very long. He must achieve his objective soon—

Kazuma blocks the two who are staring at Ayano with their eyes wide open, and says leisurely..

"Stay where you are, if you run around, you might be killed!"

Following that, he releases wind blades once more with ease, slicing the "youma" that is approaching consistently.

Shu! Pach! Pff! Puu!

In a radius of five meters around Kazuma, horrifying killing sounds sounded off over and over again.

The wind that Kazuma manipulates becomes blades at times, hammer at times, cutting the "youma" one by one, smashing them.

The "youma" is crushed in a moment, but in the blink of an eye, they recover instantly. They are originally something similar to a shape-shifting worm,

without a standard form, so physical attacks have no effect at all. Yet Kazuma still continues releasing wind. Even though it cannot cause fatal damage, but the raging winds can make the groups of “youma” unable to close in on them.

And so after a few minutes—

(—Found it.)

Kazuma who is surrounded by “youma” gives a proud smile. Almost at the same time, Ayano who completed her mission broke through the frontlines and appears before them.

“My side is finished— What are you doing?”

Ayano uses a puzzled expression to stare at Kazuma who is playing with the “youma”.

“Just as you can see.”

“No… It is precisely because I don’t get it that I am asking you.”

“The enemy is a being without form, no matter how I slice it, it will recover once more.”

“Then can’t you just purify them… Or is that to say, you cannot use the power of purification like this!?”

Kazuma usually seals his strength firmly. Even though when he used the purifying winds in front of Ayano in the past, he had released the seal—

"Nope."

"Really? You better speak the truth, and fast!"

Ayano did not ease her questioning. Thinking that she might be able to get hold of Kazuma's weakness, her face becomes filled with expectation.

"Really. Besides, I don't really want to dampen your mood…"

"What?"

"Even if what you said is true, but if the opponent is human, there is no such problem."

"Hmm…"

Indeed, even if that is the truth, Ayano's chances of winning will not increase.

Ayano, who had been so excited about nothing, looks very disappointed. Kazuma knocks her head and leaves the aftermath to her.

"So, I leave the rest up to you. I am going to head straight for their main camp."

"You found it already!?"

"Yeah, things really are different when you have good bait."

"Bait—?"

Ayano ponders on what this means. When she realized it, her face flushed red instantly.

"You… You asshole, you used me again didn't you!?"

"This is a misunderstanding."

"Just which part of it is a misunderstanding!?"

"When I thought of having you as bait, you had already ran up and became the bait yourself, so it is not my fault at all."

Kazuma says so seriously.

"You are really…"

"Sorry, I am in a rush for time. I shall listen to your complains in the future!"

Kazuma throws down this sentence coldly, and turns to leave. Ayano hurriedly shouts out to call out to him..

"Wait… Wait a minute! I am going with you too—"

"I see that you have a lot of things to settle? I will leave markings on the road, so catch up on your own later!"

Obviously, the so called “a lot of things” does not only mean eliminating the “youma”.

As Ayano’s eyes are directed towards Yukari and Nanase, Kazuma rides the wind, flying up into the sky.

“Ah, I told you to wait!”

Kazuma ignores the shout, and breaks the boundaries as when he entered, and vanishes.

Logically, Ayano knows that Kazuma’s choice is correct. But, she is unable to accept it like this. “She has been abandoned once more”, “he is obviously looking down on her”, this kind of thinking lingers in her heart, showing no sign of dispersing.

“Wuuuuu~~”

She groans in hatred, but Kazuma is long gone. So she places all her unreleased fury onto the enemy.

Her fierce scary eyes stared directly at the goo pieces. Faced with an abnormally strong murderous atmosphere, even the “youma” that bears no intelligence can’t help but retreat.

“Kazuma…”

She instills all her power into Enraiha. A glaring golden glow that makes one hard to look directly at it emerges from the crimson blade vigorously.

"You idiot—-!!"

After releasing a massive load of plasma, she burns off most of the "youma" at one go.

"—Phew."

After burning up all the "youma", Ayano breathes out, satisfied.

The result from converting all her stress into destructive behavior, she became very calm now. Just that some of the surrounding buildings were dragged into this pointless disaster, being destroyed together with the "youma".

If this is not a different dimension, there would probably be over a hundred casualties?

After the "youma" that controls this dimension is destroyed, the area begins to return to its original state slowly.

Everything returned to the way they should be. Ayano and her friends returned to the original world as well.

(Now… To settle "a lot of things".)

Ayano looks at Yukari and Nanase. Perhaps because they have finally calmed down, the two generously meet with her gaze.

"…"

Even though there are a lot of things that she must explain to them, Ayano cannot bring herself to say them.

For some time, the three exchanged silent stares.

"I…"

As though she had made up her mind, Ayano tries her best to put up a calm front and smiled at the two of them.

"So, good bye."

In the end, that is all she can say. Tossing all the necessary explanations out of her mind, Ayano turns her back at the two of them.

She tries to hold back the tears that are swelling in her eyes and walks off— But she stopped almost immediately.

"Wait, Ayano!"

Yukari grabs the lower area of her uniform, pulling her back forcefully.

"Yukari…?"

Ayano turns around and upon seeing the scene before her, she frowns instantly.

Yukari's expression— Looks perfectly normal, yet that is the most abnormal part of it.

There is not a single shred of fear in her face, nor any determination to attempt to overcome fear. All there is on that face is a brimming light filled with curiosity.

Yukari shows an expression of a prankster and says to the puzzled Ayano:

"After witnessing something so interesting, how can you leave without explaining things first?"

"What…"

Her curiosity overwhelms her fear. Even though Ayano is very puzzled by Yukari's as per normal behavior, if she does not explain clearly first, it seems that Yukari will not let her go. As she does not want to turn and leave directly, Ayano started to make her long story as short as possible.

"Frankly speaking, my family is of a En-jutsushi clan that manipulates fire—"

"No! Not that!"

"…Huh?"

"I mean that man just now— Kazuma-san! What kind of person is he? How did you get to know each other? What is your relationship with him now? Come on, spill everything, tell us all about how you two met—"

"Hey!"

Nanase knocks lightly on Yukari's head, who has been rattling on and on.

"Ouch, that hurts, Nanase~"

"Be quiet. All because of your constant nonsensical rumblings, Ayano has no idea what to do now. Besides, if you expect us to pretend that nothing happened just now, that is wishful thinking on your part!"

"Argh… So that won't happen huh?"

Before Ayano, who is at a complete loss, the two stood up. And—

"Sorry."

Yukari bows down deeply.

"Yeah… We are really sorry about earlier."

Nanase at the side, embarrassed, avoids eye contact with Ayano, and apologizes.

"… What is going on?"

"Actually, I was really afraid at first. Because fire burst out all of a sudden, and a sword came out from nowhere, Ayano seems to have turned into a totally different person. But after seeing how you talk back and forth with Kazuma-san like that, I know that you are still that Ayano I used to know."

"Talking back and forth with Kazuma… You…"

To suddenly be taken that they were having a cross talk, Ayano is displeased. Nanase continues to say at this moment:

"That is to say, there is no need to change our attitude towards you just because you can use some spells or supernatural powers."

"B… But… Aren't you afraid of me? If I want to, I can kill you two without so much as lifting a finger?"

"So?"

Nanase asks back calmly.

"What…"

"You still don't get it? There is no need for you to use some special powers, you can kill us just with your bare hands!"

"That… is true."

"So then why should we start being afraid of you only from now on? Even if you change a gun to a cannon, you still die in a single shot."

There is a certain limit to the amount of damage a human can withstand. Once he sustains an injury beyond this limit, he is doomed. There can never be a negative value being created in this manner.

To someone who possesses ten points of HP, taking ten points of damage and a thousand points of damage are basically the same. The remaining nine hundred and ninety points of damage are but an excess.

Yet, there are not many people that can understand such a simple logic in reality. Being by the side of a murderer whom you do not know, you will feel uneasy. That is to say—

"That is to say, the main point lies in whether you trust the person. But I have faith in you all along."

"Ayano has never been someone who would harm another without a reason, so, I am not afraid at all."

Ayano looks dumbly at the two of them, Yukari asks uneasily:

"So… Please don't hate us, can we still be good friends from now on?"

"…Yukari…"

Tears were about to fall from her eyes, but she never enjoyed saddening atmospheres. Ayano gets a hold of herself, and straights her thumb up from her raised fist.

"Of course! Even if you don't want to, I will not let you go!"

After acknowledging their friendship again, Yukari begins her attack once more.

"Since we have all made up, I say we should let Ayano explain clearly, everything about that man of hers!"

"Who are you calling my man!"

"Kazuma-san."

Yukari says as if it is only natural.

"I say, you—"

"Ayano, if you think that your love for him is only single sided, I think you are wrong! I am sure Kazuma-san cares a lot about you as well."

"That's right. Let's forget about whether it has reached the level of love, but anyway you have created in him a liking towards you. So there is still a chance!"

Even Nanase joined in the ruckus. This made Ayano feel very troubled.

"I already told you, that guy is… What?"

Seeing the two of them giving her a supercilious look, Ayano stopped even before she finished her rebut.

"You really are… Just earlier on you appeared to depend on him so much, and now you want to say "I have no feelings at all"?"

"I… I did not depend on him…"

"Oh? Then when you were so lost and depressed, who was it that got you back up?"

"…You, the cause of it all, still dare to talk about that."

"That is another matter."

Nanase does not care about Ayano's retaliation at all. In this world, there are a lot of things in which people with strong attitudes usually have an advantage over those who don't.

"And, why do you two want to ask about Kazuma only now? You were obviously not so interested when you met him last time."

"Because he looked like just some flippant man then."

"… Isn't that the way he is?"

"Huh— Of course not. Kazuma-san is so suave!"

Yukari says so cheekily. Ayano on the other hand stares at her with ice cold eyes below zero degrees Celsius.

"— Yukari, your taste in men is rather unique."

"Don't worry, I won't try to steal him away from you."

Ayano's eyes become even colder, but Yukari's face continues to wear that smile of hers:

"So then, leaving Ayano's feelings at one side, tell us about Kazuma. When and where did you meet? Speaking of which, I don't think we have his name yet—"

Even though the questions are coming constantly and flooding her, but Ayano sighs out in relief having escaped from her questioning. Her mouth naturally became a little loose.

"The first time I met him, is probably the day I was born, even though I have long since forgotten about it. His current surname seems to be Yagami."

"Current? You mean it is different last time?"

The two of them did not miss this small little detail. Faced with Nanase who asked that question, Ayano replies calmly:

"His original name is Kazuma Kannagi. He is my second cousin, and Ren's biological elder brother at the same time."

After explaining briefly her relationship with Kazuma, Yukari and Nanase both have a strange expression on their face.

"What's the matter?"

Ayano asks, puzzled. Yukari uses an earnest tone to say to her:

"Kazuma-san is so caring."

"Ah!?"

Hearing such an unexpected answer, Ayano screamed out loudly. But turning around to look at Nanase, she is nodding strongly as well.

"He… Just which part of him is caring?"

"Don't you know?"

Yukari asks Ayano back in a very surprised tone. Not just being surprised at how slow Ayano is, her eyes carry a certain obvious blaming glare.

"Kazuma-san has been constantly bullied in the past isn't he? Not only that, he was even chased out of the family because he did not possess "power". "

"After receiving such treatment, normally speaking he will not want to have any interactions with you people. But if it is for revenge, that would be a different case."

Nanase follows on to say:

"But, Yagami Kazuma protected you instead. And not just protect you from all harm, and even encourage you to stand up once more with your own strength."

"How thoughtful, Kazuma-san is just like Ayano's knight."

"…Ah?"

After Yukari said this sentence from the bottom of her heart, Ayano was at a loss for words.

"What… What are you talking about! Who would want a knight with a flawed personality like him! As long as I am around him, I have an urge to kill him every five minutes."

Ayano who finally got back to her senses tries hard to defend herself, but the other two kept on sighing with a "What can we do with her" kind of attitude instead.

Hearing that, Ayano became more furious.

"Just because you two have no idea how bad he is, that is why you are mistaking him for a good guy. He even used me as bait, and I almost died because of it!"

"But aren't you still alive now?"

Nanase rebuts calmly:

"When you were really in danger, didn't he come over to save you?"

"Argh…"

Spot on. But if she is to say such a thing, she will only receive even more vigorous rebuts. There is no way she can reply honestly.

"A…Anyway, that guy is one big badass! The reason he came to save me purposely this time must be for his own joy."

"Look at her, Ayano is really not honest with herself."

"It is that Yukari is too naïve! Don't drag everything into boy-girl relationships!"

After shouting out in reflex, Ayano finally remembered that now is not the time to chat casually. She looks in the direction Kazuma disappeared in, her eyebrows shows a sign of anxiety.

"So, I shall make a move first. I don't think anything will happen anymore, but still, be careful!"

With that, Ayano runs off leaving the two behind.

Yukari bears a very displeased expression, looking at the back of that person who ran off without turning her head back to look at them.

"Gee, that Ayano. It is so obvious that you have a love rival, if you continues to be so stubborn, what are you going to do then?"

Nanase at the side seems more calm on the other hand.

"Don't just look at the negative side, be more positive!"

"More positive?"

"For example…"

After keeping Yukari in suspense for a while, she says with a serious look on her face:

"We can have some fun with this topic for quite a while."

"…"

Yukari's eyes blink continuously. She looks dumbly at Nanase, her entire body frozen for a few seconds.

And then—

"Good idea, Nanase."

She puts up a boxing pose, placing tiny fists at her chest.

"Let us observe their development quietly from now on!"

With a pure and holy smile similar to a loving mother— Yet the contents of their speech is filled with bad intents.

That is to say, to not help the two develop their relationship to the next level, but to observe Ayano's reactions for fun.

"That is exactly what we should do."

Of course, Nanase has no objections either.

"If some other party take part in this, maybe things will become even more complicated."

"Yeah, and there seems to be a lot of hidden complicated facts mixed within as well."

The two smiles to each other, holding each other's hands strongly.

"Hoho, we are really thoughtful towards our friends."

Yukari thinks so from the bottom of her heart— As to what Ayano thinks about this decision, that is another problem.

Chapter 4: Fall – The Price for Power

Part 1

(Caught you…)

With absolute confidence in himself, Kazuma firmly believes that he has already won.

He has complete grasp over the scent of the enemy. And to add onto that, the enemy has not realized this yet.

Certain victory— No, a sure kill situation. Because the only difficult part of this job is merely "how to find the enemy".

From the way he gathers energy, the act of sucking the vigor of humans can be considered the last resort. Despite how efficient this method may be, the risk is great in comparison.

Killing this many people, it is impossible to keep the operation hidden, and the number of people investigating this will naturally increase. If it is a clever jutsushi, he will probably try to avoid having meaningless conflicts with these people, and in turn use a safer method.

This enemy conducts such a large scale operation, from that it is easily seen how crude his technique is. It is just like a normal human being who by some chance obtained power, and making trouble from his arrogance.

(Even though it is possible that this is just a farce— Who cares, it shouldn't matter once I found him. Besides, I already prepared a "safety precaution" here.)

Ayano will definitely chase after him. Regarding this, Kazuma has no doubts at all. As long as she follows the route signs I left— situated at every junction, the guiding winds that points in the right direction, she should be able to reach me in the shortest distance.

"So, let's just go at it!"

Kazuma murmurs, and then he steps out from "there". Below him, there is nothing in contact with his legs or body, and at the same time he felt the chains of gravity pulling him mercilessly.

From the rooftop of a sixty stories tall building— SUNSHINE60, Kazuma drops down as if committing suicide.

Raging strong winds constantly trample upon Kazuma's body, yet Kazuma still carries a fearless smile on his face.

He controls the speed and direction of his fall, and flies to the side of Ikebukuro central park. He lowers his speed, adjusting it to approximately the speed of a fall from the second story and lands gradually.

Right before the "enemy".

"… Kazuma-san…?"

The girl sitting on the bench looks dumbly at Kazuma who came from the skies.

"…"

Kazuma tilts his head downwards to look at her with a shocked expression. After a long stare, he gives a deep sigh.

"… I had considered that it might be you… But I never expected you to go to such an extent."

The girl did not reply, and only continues to smile.

This girl seems to be the only one in the park. There is no kekkai set up here, merely just that an average person would not be able to bear the youki she releases.

Even without spiritual eyes, normal instincts of living things will automatically reject abnormal presences. The youki that lingers in the park is that dense.

At the girl's feet, a smooth clear substance wriggles continuously. Despite her feet being tangled by goo that Kazuma has gotten so familiar with these few days— A youma that can consume human vigor, her expression still does not show any sign of being in pain.

This is unquestionably an obvious proof. She is the "enemy" that Kazuma has been seeking.

Kazuma looks at the girl with painful eyes, and says bitterly:

"To go to such an extent, you really want to kill me that much— Misao?"

"Of course."

Ogami Misao— A girl who is supposed to manipulate the purifying flames, yet at this moment even though youki is being released from all parts of her body, she is using an innocent smile to nod in reply.

"I never dreamt that you would find this place, the searching capabilities of a Fuu-jutsushi are really impressive."

As if chatting casually, Misao smiles at Kazuma. Maybe because she is at ease in her heart, causing her to seem as though she has no intentions of getting up from that bench. Or maybe she already saw that Kazuma has no intentions of fighting.

In fact, it is very rare to see Kazuma being unable to decide what actions to take like now.

He must not kill her. Yet, he must not let her escape.

Misao is walking onto a wrong path. If left unattended, she would fall into a deep abyss, and perhaps destroy herself in the end! Kazuma cannot watch this happen idly.

(But, what should I do?)

Frankly speaking, he is out of ideas now. He has absolutely no idea how to stop Misao without killing her.

There is nothing left to be said between the two, and so the two stare at each other silently— Alas, the still tension in the area was broken immediately.

"Is this the place!?"

A loud and clear voice sounded off in the area, together with a crimson red divine aura announcing the arrival of a divine descendent of flames. An astonishing power like the sun swept away all the youki in the park.

Kazuma turns his head slightly, and uses one corner of his eye to look at her valiant appearance. She— Ayano Kannagi seems more courageous than usual, it makes one want to clap to praise her.

"… She came."

But at this moment in time, she is but a pesky little girl. Kazuma can't help but click his tongue, mainly displeased with his own miscalculations.

(Darn— I forgot to take back all the route signs.)

It is probably due to his wavering heart, to commit such a dumb mistake. He knew that members of the Kannagi must not see Misao now, yet he led the way for them—

"Ka…"

Ayano swallowed her words back as she tried to call out to Kazuma. That is because she has noticed Misao's presence, and her eyes of shock reflected the

image of someone who "was" in her clan, so much so that it made her forget to blink.

"…Misao…?"

"Yes— Is anything the matter?"

Misao answers calmly, and then stands up.

An image of her wearing silk kimono and standing there quietly and vacantly entered her view. From the outside, this can be said to be more like Misao compared to a few days back!

However—

Ayano saw a change at a much deeper level instantly.

That is but of course.

That is because as a Jutsushi, they exist to destroy "That thing".

Her entire family has been training hard to improve their technique for the past thousand years just for that purpose.

"How… How can this…"

Ayano's eyes stare hard at Misao as she shakes her head weakly.

To her, this is perhaps the worst situation, much worse than any nightmare. As a member of a clan that

does exorcising as an occupation, an En-jutsushi that manipulates the purifying flames, Misao ironically became the youma that they must defeat.

On the other hand, Misao no longer takes note of this newly arrived character after a few seconds. She let Ayano who has yet to recover from the shock become part of the background, and focuses on Kazuma.

A never-changing smile. Looking clear and pure, a simple smile that bears only one emotion.

That is like pure water that contains no impurities, impossible to exist naturally, normal people will definitely not be able to give off such a smile.

Bearing an obvious expression of detest, Misao declares:

"Yagami Kazuma— The hateful man that killed my brother. I have sworn, no matter the price or sacrifice, I will defeat you."

"…"

This sentence sounds highly unreasonable. The one who killed Takeya is Ryuya, and Hyoue who was manipulating Ryuya amidst the shadows. Kazuma was just being made the scapegoat.

To be killed because of Kazuma— This is probably the explanation of only those who hate Kazuma would have. But, Kazuma ignores the irony within, and asks calmly:

"Do you think that you can defeat me?"

"Definitely."

Misao answers confidently:

"No matter how powerful you may be, you are still only a human. As long as I continue taking in the vigor of hundreds or thousands of people, my power will definitely surpass yours."

"…Doesn't matter, as long as you can not control it."

"I can. I only need to take in enough to defeat you. After this is over, it doesn't matter what I become."

This is not the encouraging tone that one would have when making a declaration. Even though she challenged Kazuma, such a powerful Jutsushi, Misao does not seem agitated at all.

But, can this really be considered a clear and still state of mind? After draining the life of others to obtain power, can she really laugh it out?

Even if she has fallen down the demonic path, her heart still retained that innocent smile. A pure smile that is stained with blood all over.

People call that “Madness”.

“Hey— Is that all you want to say?”

The suppressed voice finally bursts out at one go. Ayano takes a step forward, Enraiha in her hand since long ago.

“Ayano-san, this has nothing to do with you.”

“Move to one side.”

“Shut up!”

Ayano refutes the request made by both parties.

“If you want to kill Kazuma, I will not stop you. But, I will never forgive you for degenerating into a youma, and the act of harming innocent civilians. No matter the reason, things that are not meant to be done are not to be done. This is something you should know very well. Misao!”

“— So?”

Faced with Ayano’s reprimanding, that cold smile shows no indication of wavering. Hearing Misao’s reply, Ayano declares coldly:

“I have nothing else to say— Begone, Misao!”

The glow of Enraiha becomes more glaring. Before that powerful golden power, Misao's powers have no way of resisting.

If she really swung that blade down that is.

"Stop, Ayano!"

"What are you talking about!"

Ayano refuses the request for her to stop without even turning her head around.

"This is the duty of the Kannagi main family, don't interfere."

She ignores Kazuma, and raises Enraiha high up, but she just could not swing it down.

Because before she can strike off a plasma shot strong enough to vaporize Misao in one shot, Kazuma's hands held Ayano back.

"I told you to stop."

"…"

Ayano did not say a word. She maintains that posture with Enraiha high up, and she lowers her head down.

In terms of physical techniques, the difference in strength between the two is also as great as heaven

and Earth. Ayano is unable to escape Kazuma's binds based on physical techniques alone.

Indeed, based on physical techniques alone.

Kazuma's mistake, lies in him underestimating Ayano's fury.

Seeing that Kazuma only cares for Misao, and is completely ignoring her, Ayano's fury has slowly risen to the level filled with killing intent.

This kind of emotion, she has not realized it at all. And because of that, she cannot control herself, plus, Ayano's greatest strong point lies at how straightforward she is, she will not hesitate at anything.

"…Let…go…"

"— What did you say?"

Kazuma, who did not catch her words, leans towards Ayano.

"Let go of me!!"

Kaboom!

Flames burst out from Ayano's entire body.

"Woah!?"

Even though he was not burnt by it, but Kazuma in his shock released Ayano's hands slightly.

Grabbing this chance, Ayano leaps at Misao.

It is said that an expert in Jigen-Ryu can travel a distance of about nine meters in every step. And Ayano's strength is not below this standard.

In the blink of an eye, Ayano has already closed in before Misao.

"Chuck—"

Kazuma manipulates the wind instantly, intending to blow Ayano away. Yet at this point in time, it is perhaps a little too much to handle with his power.

(Will I make it in time—?)

Kazuma is very anxious, yet the movement of a shadow is even swifter than Kazuma.

It is a shadow indeed.

Misao's shadow begins to extend, and inflates into a three-dimensional state. A huge pitch black face lies right before Misao.

"…Huh?"

That gigantic face opens its mouth wide, and Ayano raises the Enraiha at the same moment. There is no way to stop them now.

As if she jumped into it herself, Ayano gets swallowed by the mouth of that gigantic face.

"…Ah…"

Kazuma does not know how to express his feelings now. He exaggeratedly swallows his saliva, and looks at the big face that swallowed Ayano up.

Because it was too spectacular, he was unable to say anything at all. This kamikaze attack style is just like Ayano. Maybe he should worry about her, but with things having become the way they are, it is very comical— In fact, he can only laugh.

But, laughing will not solve all the problems at hand. Kazuma gives a dry laugh for a while, and then leisurely begins to summon the wind.

"Gee— What a troublemaker—"

As he is about to release wind blades, Misao halts Kazuma softly.

"It is best you do not do that."

"—Ah ah?"

"If you kill it, Ayano-san will forever be lost amidst the gaps in time."

Kazuma maintains that posture with his right hand raised up and stopped his actions.

Misao reaches out to cover her mouth, and finally broke into laughter.

"Despite how heartless you sound, you still treasure Ayano-san. Won't it be better to just say so frankly to her face?"

"What will telling her do? She will only go overboard. By the way, what do you intend to do with Ayano?"

Misao laughs even more happily.

"Don't worry, I only intend to send her away slightly. Even though I can use her as a hostage, you probably won't trade your life for hers, right?"

"Of course."

Kazuma says without hesitation:

"Even if she is the daughter of Soushu, I have no reason to go to such an extent."

"The daughter of Soushu? Is that the only reason?"

Misao laughs with some deep meaning. To that, Kazuma answers clearly:

"What other reason would there be?"

"… So be it, this is of no relevance to the two of us."

"Indeed. So, what do you plan to do next?"

"I will be going off soon, because my power is insufficient to defeat you now."

As she says this, Misao's shadow becomes a cone shape and surrounds her. As Ayano is now her hostage, Kazuma is unable to attack that thing.

"Take care."

Before Kazuma who is unable to do anything, Misao disappears as if swallowed up by the shadow, leaving no trace behind. Up against this kind of movement that travels beyond space, even Kazuma cannot ask the wind to follow them.

"…Gee."

Kazuma grumbles in a tired voice, and sat down at a bench nearby.

At the same time, Ayano's scent suddenly appeared. The distance is a little far— But, Kazuma has no intention of travelling specially to welcome her.

(Anyway she will definitely be angry again.)

If possible, he does not intend to meet her until she is no longer angry. Even if he knows that that would be impossible.

He takes out a cigarette from his bosom and nibbles on it. After drawing in the smoke to fill his entire lung area and letting his mood settle down, Kazuma

takes a relaxed position as he waits for the return of the girl.

After about ten minutes.

Ta ta ta ta ta ta ta ta ta!!

Sounds of bold footsteps as if planning to break the surface of the ground appeared. Kazuma, who is leisurely sitting on the bench, turns his head around, biting the cigarette, and praising the return of Ayano.

The place Ayano was thrown off, is on the other side of the station. Even though the direct distance is not even three kilometers, with confusing paths and many traffic lights, it is not that easy to pass through.

Yet Ayano reached here in less than ten minutes. From this it is easy to see that, be it the question of her physical fitness or traffic morals, she had tossed them to the far ends of her mind.

Seeing Ayano who is panting continuously, Kazuma says in his regular tone:

“Not bad. You wanna participate in mid-distance Olympics?”

“Where is Misao!?”

Cutting short Kazuma’s joke, Ayano questions with a scary look on her face.

"Escaped."

"Escaped—!? Why!?"

"How should I say this…"

Kazuma hesitates on how to explain, thinking back on what happened a few minutes ago.

(So, how should I explain this…)

Thinking and thinking about it, he just could not find a suitable way of phrasing it, and so in the end he decided to choose a way of expressing it that sounds very superficial.

"Basically, a lot happened."

This is the excuse he tried his best to come up with. But before that, he could have perhaps considered the way he looks, as he spits out smoke rings, he does not seem convincing at all.

"Oh—? "A lot happened"? Just what happened?"

This reason naturally is unable to make Ayano submit. Ayano stares at Kazuma with eyes of high suspicion, as if saying "don't tell me you were seduced by her".

Kazuma just gives a bitter smile, and does not rebut in any way.

Indeed, he can hardly say he tried his best. Other than ensuring Ayano's safety, he must nab Misao at the same time— This was not impossible for him.

But—

(I am still too naïve…)

He sighs out as if mocking himself. What point is there being bothered by something that the person concerned has long forgotten…

Under Ayano's blaming eyes, Kazuma stands up.

"—Where are you going?"

"Home. She will probably not come out again today."

Against the back of that man leaving as if nothing happened, Ayano uses a nervous voice to declare:

"Let me remind you, I will report everything today as it is. The Kannagi will go full force at eliminating Misao. If you dare to obstruct us—"

"Who are you talking to, girl?"

A cold voice interrupted Ayano's words. Kazuma turns around, and the cold smile on his face sends a chill down her spine.

"If you want to stop me, then don't just talk, tell me with your strength! If you are mentally prepared— I will take you on anytime."

Ayano almost forgot to breathe, and just watched Kazuma who stepped out once more. When the shadow had disappeared down the stairs, she fell to her knees.

Her entire body could not stop trembling. Once again she has experienced first-hand, that she must never become the enemy of this man, Kazuma.

Even so, she must still eliminate Misao. If she didn't, then the Kannagi clan would lose the meaning of their existence.

"Just what do you expect me to do…"

She can't help but begin to complain.

Part 2

"Ta… Takeshi!?"

Seeing the blood-stained youth in Masayuki's arms, Takeya's expression changes greatly, and runs to his father immediately.

"Father! What are you thinking—"

Masayuki walks past Takeya at his own pace, and places Takeshi down before Misao who was stunned by the scene.

"Treat him."

After giving that order, Masayuki turns around as if it is nothing.

"… Wait."

Takeya uses a suppressed voice to stop Masayuki who is about to walk out of the room.

"Tell me, why did you cause Takeshi to be in such a state—"

"Training."

"Don't joke around with me!"

Hearing his father's straight reply, Takeya shouts out immediately to scold:

"This is an illegal punishment! Why must you go to such an extent!?"

"Takeshi did not get enough practice, that is why he is injured."

"Takeshi is only ten!"

"So what?"

Masayuki questions back with an emotionless look on his face:

"This has nothing to do with age. Since he is born in the Ogami family, then it is his duty to become strong. If you have time to complain, why don't you use that time to train."

"You asshole…"

Takeya's eyes are filled with hatred, totally unlike the attitude one would normally have towards his own family. However, a slight mockery was shown in those eyes unintentionally.

"Did you think such superficial efforts would actually be of use?"

"…What do you mean?"

"You are just trying to get back at uncle aren't you? That uncle that took the title of chief away from you without so much of an effort!"

After such a taunting speech was said, the originally emotionless Masayuki's expression changes entirely.

"Damn… Damn you!"

Bearing a black face, he hits his son's face forcefully.

This is a strike when he is truly angry. Takeya's whole body was sent flying instantly, and aftering breaking the paper door, he rolled onto the corridor.

"Onii-san!"

"…I am fine."

Replying to Misao's cry, Takeya moves the remains of the paper door away and stands up. He spit out his saliva with blood mixed within, and looks at Masayuki with extremely belittling eyes.

"I was right, wasn't I?"

"… Shut it!"

"If you want to beat uncle, then do it yourself— You already became a loser the moment you decided to push everything on to your son!"

"I told you to shut it!!"

"Stop this!"

Misao hugs Masayuki who intends to beat up Takeya again tightly, and tries her best to cry out to stop them:

"Please stop this… Don't do this anymore…"

"…"

Masayuki does not seem willing to go to the extent of using violence on Misao. He forcefully flings off Misao, who was hugging his right arm, and leaves the room with irregular footsteps.

"Hehe, I finally said it."

"Are you alright, onii-san?"

Seeing Misao, who is looking very worried, Takeya waves at her with a smile.

"This is nothing, don't worry. By the way, you better hurry and take a look at Takeshi's injuries. When that is over, then help me over here."

"— Okay." Misao takes out the first-aid kit hurriedly, and begins to treat Takeshi who is covered with injuries all over his body.

"— Let me tell you this, Misao."

"Yes?"

"That ass of a father only treats us as tools of revenge."

"Onii-san, about that—"

Takeya, with a solemn expression, stops Misao who intends to try to cover up for their father.

"This is what it is, just accept this reality. It is the same for mum, she has no intentions of raising us. So, we must become strong, so as to be able to live independently without them."

"Onii-san…"

"You must be strong too, Misao. You must become strong enough to live on alone."

Hearing her beloved brother say this, Misao shakes her head hard in denial:

"No, I am not alone. I have onii-san with me, Takeshi as well."

"—No."

"Takeshi? You shouldn't get up yet…"

Takeshi who is supposed to be still unconscious, woke up without them realizing it. He pushes away the hand that intends to make him lie down on the bed once more, and slowly lifts his upper body up.

"Onee-san will be alone. Because—"

Suddenly, Takeshi's head began swaying. His entire head tilts to an angle where his neckbone obviously came off, and pa-chunk, drops off.

"— Ah!"

Takeshi's head kept on rolling, and in the end it stopped right before Misao, upside down.

"Because, we are already dead."

(— We?)

Misao turns her head around hurriedly.

(…Onii… Onii-san…)

The connecting part of Takeya's body is entirely cut off. Becoming a lower half that lies facing down, and an upper half that lies facing upwards. The open empty eyes stare into the ceiling.

"We were both killed by Kazuma."

Misao turns her head around once more. The upside down head uses a clear voice to say:

"How I wish to become strong, and protect oneesan."

There was not a single drop of blood flowing out from the upwards cut. That abnormally smooth surface looks just like a computed tomography scan.

"But, I can't do it. Because I have already been killed— Like this!"

A shadow appears suddenly without warning, and places his foot on Takeshi's head, stepping on it just like that.

Kachunk.

Her cute younger brother, his head shatters like a fragile glass art piece.

"Hohoho…"

A hearty laugher came into her ears. Lifting her head, a man came into the center of her view, mocking them.

Yagami Kazuma— That is the name of her hateful enemy, the person who took everything away from her.

This is the first time Ogami Misao has hated someone so much, so much so that she hopes for him to die. Fantasizing herself stained with Kazuma's spilt blood made her feel joy.

"Ah… Ah… Ahhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

Her burning hatred became red lotus flames, locking Kazuma in a scorching jail.

(I succeeded—!)

Yet, the joy of victory lasts but a moment. After the flames disappeared, there lies Kazuma, uninjured.

"Too weak."

He says so coldly, and reaches his hand to point at Misao. Raging winds released from his fingertip blows Misao out of the residence.

(This place is…?)

Gradually and unknowingly, Misao realizes that she is floating amidst the darkness. Unable to see anything, nor feel anything. Her five senses are not functional.

(Am I… Dead…?)

The dreadful enemy that killed my brothers are right before me, yet I cannot even avenge them—

Too weak—

Kazuma's mockery rings in her ears, even if she goes full force, she cannot fight against him. The difference in power is just too great.

(I don't want to lose like this… If only I had more power… For power, I am willing to do anything, it doesn't matter no matter what I will have to lose…)

In the darkness, Misao even hoped for a devil to come. If she can use her soul to trade for power, she will do so without hesitation.

“Hoho, you seem to have had a good dream, Misao.”

The youth shows an innocent smile, looking by his feet.

Just from the fact that he can smile looking at that scene, perhaps people would consider him as one of the bad guys?

In the holy space that was originally meant for praying to God, it is now filled with glue-like monsters.

The monster that covers the entire floor were completely packed up to two meters in height, forming an area that could be called a sea of goo.

The slime that stretches out from within like tentacles are tangling on a statue of Jesus pinned on a cross. This scene is so disrespectful to God that it would make a faithful believer faint upon seeing it.

At the bottom of this sea of goo, Misao is floating within, naked. Maybe because she is still dreaming, her expression is distorted by sadness from time to time.

It has been over a week since this kind of dream begin. A dream mixed with both fantasies and reality, is slowly and gradually invading Misao's consciousness.

Which part is real, which part is but a fantasy, Misao cannot differentiate clearly anymore. She only hates Kazuma, the Kazuma who took away her precious family members from her—

(I want power… A power that can defeat that man…)

"Then use all the power that is flooding this place!"

The youth solemnly commands her. Hearing a reply, which should have been impossible, Misao's body shook. In those wide empty eyes, a youth that gives off a brilliant glow is reflected within.

(… You are…?)

"I am an angel. As a servant to the one absolute God, I will grant your wish."

(Angel…?)

"Let me bestow strength upon you! Because your wish is justified. Justified wishes will get justified rewards— This is what it means to have "Justice"."

(Give me… Strength…?)

Impossible.

In her misty consciousness came a weak voice of refutation.

An angel means a messenger of God, a representative of absolute justice. Such an existence will never bestow power upon her.

But at this moment, the voice appeared once more.

That voice said, “this is but of course”.

Misao who is unable to find an answer, lifts her head and uses begging eyes to look at the youth.

Before her eyes lie a being beyond any, giving off a holy glow from all around his body. Despite how young he seems to be from the outside, the wisdom hidden within his eyes are beyond measure, showing a dignified figure worshipped by thousands.

Just questioning whether his words are true seems like a disrespectful act.

There was no need to consider, as he is an existence that stands above all man. That absolute will of heaven allows no arguments, Man should just blindly follow the orders—

Misao does not know at all, that this is not the first time she has met this youth, nor the fact that her memories has been changed countless times already.

Every time this “first meeting” is repeated, Misao’s consciousness is changed little by little. The cold eyes

that she placed upon the youth who claimed to be an angel, in their "real" first meeting, are no more.

Now, the way Misao looks at the youth, within her eyes, she is almost worshipping him. With an expression like forgetting oneself when having high fever, there is no reason left within her.

"To obtain power, are you prepared to sacrifice, Misao?"

To the question from the youth, Misao nods without hesitation.

(No matter what happens, I will not hesitate… Angel-sama.)

"Good girl."

The youth waves his right hand like a conductor waving his stick. Following his movements, the grossly wriggling sea of goo begins to give off a faint phosphorescent glow.

One, two— The phosphorescence being made consistently gathers around Misao, shining upon her naked body.

(This is… Power…?)

Misao reaches out to the gentle phosphorescence uneasily with her hand, and a passionate and uplifting

power flows into her body from her fingertips. Following that—

"Noooooooooooooo!! Somebody…Somebody save me ahhhhh!!"

Dying screams rings in Misao's head. As the power flows in, the hatred that comes along made her realize what these phosphorescences really are.

That is the light of life. Just like picking the most matured fruit, the essence of life that is harvested at the most fulfilling moments of these people.

(—Arrrgh!)

Misao is unable to withstand such a horrifying feeling, her entire body resists the power that is flowing in. The phosphorescence released dims slightly, then as if being squeezed back by something, returns to under Misao's feet.

"What is the matter, Misao? Don't you want power?"

The youth continues to wear a kind and loving smile, constantly seducing her with the forbidden method of consuming her own kind. Misao lifts her head to look at the youth, her eyes were those of fear.

(B… But… This is…)

"Don't worry, this is not a crime. Because your wish is justified, and as long as your wish is justified, anything you do for it will also be justified. Right?"

This means, that the end justifies the means? This is not called quibbling, this is a ridiculous logic.

But—

Faced with the phosphorescence that come forth upon being released, Misao reaches out to grab them once more. Ignoring the bone-chilling screams, she squeezes the light in her hand till they are shattered. A fulfilling feeling surges out from her body, and she can clearly sense that the power that flowed in has become hers.

"That is the way, keep absorbing!"

Hearing the youth's hush, Misao nods in response. She has been acknowledged by God— This "fact" made Misao's guilt instantly disappear without a trace.

The phosphorescence floating around flies into her body continuously. Where did they come from, who do they belong to, these questions are not important. The fact that her heart bears a strong desire to kill Kazuma causes her to greedily take in the power.

(Power… I need even more power!)

Her hatred for Kazuma grows and inflates consistently, logic and views being ripped off entirely. Massive power continues flowing into that unstable mind.

If it was an average person, he would have had a mental breakdown long ago, and be unable to even maintain the shape of a human. Even Misao, who is merely using her desire for revenge against Kazuma to support her, is barely able to maintain consciousness.

"Not bad, to actually not breakdown yet. The Kannagi bloodline is really not to be underestimated."

Lowering his head to look at that scene, the youth gives off a sigh.

"I had intended to just play a little… But I guess I should get serious!"

His large eyes squint to a line, from those eyes, a glow similar to that of a carnivore was reflected within.

But that was just for an instant, those green eyes returned to their original shine instantly. Those eyes are just that of a kid that knows not of the suffering of others, with innocence and cruelty mixed together at the same time.

"Misao— Since your child wants to take revenge, as parents you should help out too. Don't you think so?"

Looking at the girl who is single-mindedly and greedily seeking move vigor, the youth asks happily from deep within his heart.

Part 3

Seeing the shadow of Kazuma, Ayano shrinks her body at that moment.

Juugo thinks it to be very strange and looks at her with eerie eyes, but looks back at Kazuma after that.

Kazuma's attitude is the same as always. Regarding Ayano who seems unsettled, he does not even bother to look at her, his eyes looking directly at Juugo.

"Sorry, to call you over suddenly."

"It's nothing— What is the matter?"

Looking at Kazuma who has sat down, Juugo goes straight to the point and declares:

"I would like to cancel my previous request."

"Of course. To not do anything and hope to get money, how can there be such a good thing in this world."

Ayano suddenly smiles, her attitude becoming abnormally taunting.

(…Did something happen again?)

Juugo feels worried about his emotionally unstable daughter, but on the surface he still maintains his calm attitude.

He orders the arrogant Ayano:

"You too, you are not to interfere with this from now on."

"—Huh? W…Why?"

"Misao's punishment, will be conducted with the leadership of the Ogami. This has been decided."

Juugo disregards all objections with a tone that does not allow any doubt.

Ayano, who is at a loss, lifts her head to look at her father, but her father seems to have no intentions of continuing to explain.

She looks at Kazuma. The usual satirizing smile is not on his face, in replacement, it is an expression of mockery, insult— and anger.

"—That is enough. Just because he intends to finish his daughter with his own hands, he hopes that this ugly news will be forgotten? And you accepted this proposal?"

"— There is no choice, we cannot just cut our relations with the Ogami."

(… So that is what is going on.)

Hearing the two's straight conversation, Ayano finally understood the situation now.

What Misao has done is clearly unforgivable. That is not to say that taking a gun to start a terrorist attack can be forgiven, but that is just a normal crime, and can be settled just by the police.

But, as a Jutsushi who is meant to exorcise youma, to degenerate into a youma herself. The seriousness of this matter is something the previous example cannot be compared with, as this is a grave matter that can lead to the life or death of a clan.

Even if Ayano or Kazuma were to punish Misao, this responsibility is not to be on Misao's alone. The Ogami family will definitely be dragged in as well!

Ogami Masayuki intends to punish his daughter who has committed a forbidden and grave mistake by his very own hands, so as to clear the name of the Ogami.

This may be his wishful thinking, but logically it makes sense. As long as he brings up the excuse that "it is the duty of her parents", there is probably no one who can refuse him.

(So in this case… Kazuma must be very angry…)

Ayano even thinks that he would be so angry he would want to go and kill Masayuki this instant. But surprisingly, Kazuma looks very calm.

"So be it, since you are the one who requested for my help, you can do as you wish to terminate your request, but I have my way of doing things as well."

Seeing that Kazuma insists on not letting the matter off, Juugo frowns.

"You will take part in this no matter what?"

"Yes."

"… So that is the case."

Knowing that he cannot persuade Kazuma out of this, Juugo sighs heavily.

"By the way."

Kazuma asks out of curiousity:

"You said that the Ogami will lead this, but is there any fighting power left in the Ogami now? Or maybe I should say, since Misao has become like that, then won't there be no descendents left in the Ogami family?"

From what Kazuma knows, the children of Masayuki are only Takeya, Misao and Takeshi. Masato was not even married.

So assuming that they did not find any illegitimate children within these four years, there is no one to take up the title of the next head of the Ogami.

However, Ayano toppled such a mindset.

"There is still Takeya's son."

"Huh? He is married?"

"He has been married two years ago. Just half a year ago, a pair of male twins were born."

"Oh— That is really…"

Maybe he felt that he was getting old, that is why Kazuma had such an emotional reply.

"Maybe I should have sent his wife a bouquet of flowers?"

"— Don't mention that, be careful that you don't get stabbed with a knife again."

Hearing Kazuma's lame joke, Ayano rebuts him, looking as though she has a painful headache.

"But, their fighting power is still not enough! What can the head and his wife do with just their daughter-in-law?"

"I never said that the Ogami will be doing this alone. The Kuga and Shijou families have agreed to help."

Just to mention, both these families are branch families of the Kannagi. Especially the Kuga, as Takeya's wife, Sei, is from the Kuga, so their relationship is very close.

"—Hmm. Even though I don't really think that those people in the branch families can be of much help, but they still have to try whatever they can do!"

Kazuma says coldly, and then stands up.

"So, I will be going back now. Call me again when there is a job."

"W… Wait a minute!"

The foot that is just about to step out of the room stopped. Ayano directs the question that she keep in her heart for a long time at the back of that person who did not even turn his head back:

"Why… Why are you so concerned about Misao? Is it because… You like her?"

Her usual imposing tone is not there at all. Even though she does not wish to have to open her mouth to ask this question, yet at the same time she must.

This dilemma is reflected in her tone, so she seems to be hesitating as she asked.

However, Kazuma's attitude is the same as always.

"It doesn't concern you."

A very cold reply. The paper door, as if to obstruct further questions, closes coldly.

Hearing the footsteps that leave gradually, Ayano curses softly:

"Idiot…"

Chapter 5: Fall Part Two – The Price of Soul

Part 1

"…!"

A man reading a horse racing paper while leaning against a wall noticed a woman passing through the edge of his field of view.

Wearing a tidy blue silk kimono, she looked to be in her early twenties. The man inconspicuously raised the newspaper to hide his face, but did not take his eyes off the girl.

The woman, seemingly oblivious to her observer, continued walking at the same pace. The man folded the paper under his armpit, and drew a cell phone from his belt holster.

"I see her. Tailing the target."

(Meanwhile…)

A middle-aged man dangled a silver chain over an opened map. There is a platinum ring at the chain that

forms a loop, wavering at a height that almost touches the map.

"Hmm…"

Suddenly, the chain began to shift in a certain direction, jerking unnaturally as if pulled by some invisible force.

The man traced the direction of the chain's motion. Realizing he had gone too far, he moved back to his starting point, and after some trial and error he finally stopped at the point where the invisible force has led him.

"…Is this the place?"

The dowsing ring spun over a point on the map. The man noted the name of the location and reached for the phone on the table.

A young woman is stared attentively at a crystal ball. The beauty dressed up as a fortune teller that can be seen anywhere on the streets gave off a mysterious aura, even though it would be inappropriate to describe her this way.

The crystal ball of twenty centimeters is carved and polished flawlessly, yet for some reason there was a white mist at the its center.

In order to see through the mist, the woman glared intensely at the crystal ball, almost popping a nerve at her temple.

"…!"

Perhaps because of her effort, the white mist gradually dispersed, and an image resembling a building began to emerge.

The entire structure looked thin and long, and a black cross was set in the upper half of the white wall.

Zooming the image in on the entrance, the "fortune teller" carefully wrote down the words carved on the door.

"Speaking of which, how daring. This is indeed a blind spot."

Smiling in praise at the unknown enemy, she walked out of the room to make her report.

(An hour later…)

The ten jutsu-shi led by Oogami Masayuki all gathered near a certain church at Ikebukuro. The pur-

pose, needless to say, is to hunt down Misao, whom they have finally found.

The operation was a little rushed, as there was no time to hesitate. Although the hunters had failed to locate Misao's hiding place up to this point, they suddenly managed to find her through a few sources.

It was so easy as to almost be too suspicious… or rather, a trap that couldn't be any more obvious, akin to Misao waving her hand before their very eyes. One could say that she hid herself during a game of hide-and-seek, and then purposely stuck her head out, as if deliberately wanting Kazuma to catch her.

Nonetheless, Misao's power should still be insufficient to defeat Kazuma. Precisely because of this, Masayuki acted with haste in order to put an end to this himself before Misao was defeated by someone else…

"Listen up people, there may even be a few among you that are on good terms with Misao, but such misconceptions end now. She is an unforgivable evil that has been corrupted into a demon, so do not hold back against her. In order to uphold the name and honor of the Kannagi, we must eradicate her with all of our

might so that not even a single cell of her being remains!"

Standing before his gathered subordinates, Masayuki gave an emphatic speech. No one failed to understand that he really meant that "The survival of the Oogami family depends on this battle!"

Or rather, he meant nothing other than this. Emotions such as love, pity, and the pain of having to end his own daughter by his very hands were all but absent from the man. Perhaps he hardened his heart simply because the target is his own daughter - that would be a reasonable explanation, but it would certainly take a stretch of the imagination to believe that Masayuki truly meant those words from the bottom of his heart. His attitude was just like that.

As Ayano left the group, she pondered while watching Masayuki's back, "Maybe it was because of her father's insensitivity that Misao couldn't stand losing her brothers…"

Even so, the unpleasant feelings lingered in her heart. Perhaps it was merely the wishful thinking of a child, but Ayano felt that this was not the right way to raise a family.

Ren seemed to have the same thoughts, as his unease was plain.

"So then…"

After finishing his speech, Masayuki turned in their direction, a flattering smile on his face.

"If Kazuma comes over, please deal with him."

"…Hmm."

Under no obligation to put Masayuki at ease, Ayano blankly nodded in reply. Unsure of her answer, Masayuki frowned and asked again, "Are you sure it'll be fine?"

"What do you mean?"

"Are you confident you can win against Kazuma?"

"How could I possibly be confident about something like that?" Ayano said frankly. Instead of trying to scare him, she simply stated her true opinion.

However, Masayuki's expression immediately changed following those words.

"How.. how can that be!? Then why did you promise to take care of Kazuma!?"

"Do you even need to ask? It's because I am the only who can do it."

Ayano looks coldly at the shocked Masayuki, and brusquely added, "No matter what your thoughts may be, Misao must be eliminated - not by the hands of others, but by us, the Kannagi clan, so I will not let Kazuma make trouble regarding this matter. If was up to you guys, you would all be killed within three seconds. But, I can buy you people up to three minutes, so figure something out during this period of time!"

The whole area became quiet instantly. Again, Ayano was not trying to be an alarmist; the number she gave, three minutes, was already a very optimistic estimate.

To think that they naively believed they could relax simply because Ayano would be facing Kazuma for them… perhaps the image of the "weak Kannagi Kazuma" is still buried deep in their hearts after all!

"So, what is the battle strategy?"

Ignoring the tension, Ayano cut to the chase and confronted Masayuki. If they had intended to fight a prolonged battle, it was time for a change of plans.

"Y-Yes. We intend to lure Misao out from the church, and then chase her to the opposite park. This entire area has been secured, so there is no worry that

other people may get involved in this. After that we are going to set up spiritual wards in the park. Misao will be like a fish caught in a net. The plan is absolutely foolproof."

"Oh…"

This actually wasn't a bad plan. In terms of battle strength, Misao is not much of a threat, so by sealing off all possible escape routes they shouldn't lose even with ten people.

"But, who is blocking the area off? And, the ward is…"

Ayano's voice trailed off when she recognized a female figure walking towards the area. The woman is wearing a tall and slim outfit with trousers. Though her face was partially obscured by sunglasses, Ayano somehow felt that she had seen this person before.

"The barrier is ready. We can start any time."

After a routine report, the woman took off her sunglasses. Ayano's eyes widened instantly.

"A-Ahhhhhh…!!"

Without thinking, she pointed and cried out. That is undoubtedly the woman from before, that Kirika holding hands with Kazuma at the love hotel street.

"Hi, Ayano."

Kirika smiles faintly, looking at Ayano expectantly.

"…You know each other?"

"We've met," Kirika replied nonchalantly. Masayuki glared at her with a grave expression.

"I hope you mind your tone. Ayano-sama has the bloodline of the main family, so she should not be spoken to directly like this…"

"Oh, excuse my rudeness."

Kirika apologizes respectfully, gracefully cutting off Masayuki's inevitable lecture, and saluted Ayano formally.

"I am Superintendent Tachibana Kirika from the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department. It is a pleasure to meet you."

"Police..? The surname Tachibana, could it be that…"

"I am from a branch family," Kirika smiled as she shrugged her shoulders.

Ayano only got more confused. The Tachibana name belonged to a famous Onmyouji clan. Even for a branch family, how is it possible for a member of the Tachibana clan became a police officer?

(“Prepare a ward”—?)

Ayano instantly shifted her strict gaze to Masayuki.

“You sought the help of police?”

The duty of the Kannagi clan is to eradicate demons through direct combat, and the nature of their work requires cooperation from governmental agencies such as the police. Because of the clan’s close relationship with the authorities and their astounding efforts at protecting society for the past millenium, some unreasonable requests are still accepted.

But in this case, unrelated personnel like the police should never have been involved from the start. The criminal they are hunting down is from their own family, a Kannagi jutsu-shi descended into a demon. Moreover, that particular woman’s murders of over a hundred have left a great stain on the clan’s reputation. Such a fact should not be revealed to outsiders.

“N-No… This is because…”

Masayuki cowered at Ayano’s interrogation, but Kirika maintained her relaxed attitude.

“Please calm down, we are helping in response to Juugo-san’s request.”

"Father…?" Ayano asks in doubt. Masayuki who is hiding behind Kirika hurriedly nodded in agreement

"That's right, Oogami Misao's hiding spot was also investigated and located by us."

Even so, Ayano still didn't understand. Why would her overly cautious father do something that even she thought was dumb?

Ignoring Ayano's hostile eyes, Kirika defenselessly approached the girl. Then, she leaned in by the the threatening Ayano's ear, and said softly so that only she could hear, "Be mindful of what we know."

Ayano trembled lightly. Kirika continued speaking, looking as if though she was stifling laughter, "Those things that you 'do not want others to know', we already know very well. For example, what Oogami Misao did… But, we have still not yet confirmed actual number of victims."

(Should I kill her…?)

Ayano mulled it over. Although she would really rather not do so, there was no ignoring what Kirika said.

"You intend to threaten the Kannagi?" Ayano asked to confirm it one last time. If the other party nodded, there would be no turning back.

But Kirika calmly shook her head.

"Now, now, I am not so ignorant. Besides, a minor issue like this is not enough to use as a threat."

"…What do you mean?"

"Ultimately the 'value' of the Kannagi will not be shaken by this minor scandal. The higher-ups might

use it as a bargaining chip if they knew of it, but this information will be kept safely with me."

Ayano raised an eyebrow.

"Did you just say you won't threaten us?"

"Don't you get it? I'm trying to show my sincerity."

"…?"

"What I mean is that you can kill me now… and nobody will ever know."

"…! Why are you…?"

"This is a small price to pay for the trust of the clan head. Besides, we will also be on record as having helped the Kannagi."

"…"

Ayano had a strange hunch. The "we" that had appeared several times in Kirika's speech did not seem to refer to the entire police organization. There is only one explanation that she can think of - something bridging the unrelated powers of the police and jutsushi.

"Could you be that…? That…unit called Information Consolidation Department or something…?"

"To be more accurate, it would be the Special Investigation Unit. I am the chief of that department," Kirika nodded proudly.

The Special Investigation Unit of the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department, a department that was only recently established. As if trying to hide from the others, the nameplate of this department lurks quietly in a corner of the basement of the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department. Everyone knows of the existence of this department, but the actual number of people that know what they do is very few, to the extent that hardly anybody within the entire police department even knows what the "Special Investigation" means at all.

In other words, no such department exists. Such an obscure department name could only have been created to conceal the nature of its operations.

For over a century after the ancient Bureau of Onmyou was disbanded, Japan passed on most of the spiritual protecting jobs to its people. In order to gain a foothold in the modern era, the SIU was established - the only government-run exorcising organization.

As they are unable to label themselves as exorcists in broad daylight, the department picked a general

name implying that it 'does odd jobs'. It is even rumored that the name of the organization is even derived from the same pronunciation as 'dead spirits'.

Leaving the etymology of government agencies, its establishment made a considerable impact in the field of exorcism.

"Oh, so there really is such a department. I hadn't heard of any of its activities, so I just figured it for some kind of urban legend."

From Ayano's current understanding, it is something like that.

"Hmph."

Kirika looked hurt by such a harsh comment.

"O-Of course we have been active! Restoring distorted spiritual fields, suppressing land-bound spirits and the like… it's only because we've yet to obtain jutsu-shis with combat abilities that we've been unable to plan large scale exorcisms."

"Ah, so you are a bunch of people that works in the shadows. That sure is befitting of a government function."

Ayano put on a smug grin that was so arrogantly "cute" to the point that it made one want slap her.

But Kirika was an adult, after all. Instead of showing her anger, she kindly smiled, "Well, the higher-ups are always unable to understand our unnoticeable activities. Ayano, do you want to come over and work in the SIU? Even as part-time job?"

"I refuse."

Ayano's reply was firm. Yet, as if she just thought of something, looked questioningly at Kirika.

"Ah… could it be that, that one time you were trying to persuade Kazuma to join?"

"Huh? Ah, you meant the last time we met?" Kirika simply smirked.

Their positions were switched instantly. Ayano, now at a disadvantage, refused to give in and replied with a scowl, but her eyes revealed nothing but empty threats.

"Deep down, you really hope that I met with Kazuma only because of work, right?"

"N-No, I don't…"

Despite her denying it with her mouth, Ayano couldn't help but ask again:

"…So, what was it for?"

Seeing Ayano's cowed look, Kirika replied, "I'm not telling."

"…!"

"Be it for private reasons or work, I am under no obligations to tell you anything. Isn't that right?"

(This.. This woman..!)

Ayano's eyes burned with murderous intent. Even against such a menacing glare, Kirika still maintained her relaxed smile.

As the two continued their battle of egos, a hand tugged at Ayano's sleeve. She glanced down before promptly turning back to face Kirika.

"Don't interrupt me, Ren. I must settle things with this woman…"

"But everyone is waiting for us."

"Huh…?"

Ayano followed Ren's gaze, noticing ten very disgruntled jutsu-shi's observing their catfight.

Masayuki seemed especially impatient. Despite his best attempts to control his temper and anxiety, he was unable to hide a very obvious nerve pulsing at his temple. It was almost as if he was using all of his will

to hold back the impulse to scream "Hurry up, you two brats!!!"

Instead of roaring, Masayuki asked with insincere calm, "It is about time to head for the church… Are the both of you ready?"

But of course, these two were not mere brats who would be afraid of someone like Masayuki. They turned to the man with the fake smile on his face, and icily replied,

"Then shall we?"

"Feel free to go now."

Masayuki's smile froze. He looked dumbly at the two with an expression that was neither laughing nor crying.

"I believe I said earlier that 'we can start anytime'. Or are you implying that there is some reason that we must go together with you?"

"Mm…"

"You better hurry and move along. If she escapes, are you going to take responsibility?"

"Mmm…"

After being blasted by the two's words continuously, Masayuki's face flushed red, unable to say any

more. Facing the old man cursing her with his eyes, Ayano waved him away with the indifference one would shoo a dog away with.

"Mmmgghh… Everyone, let's go!"

After shouting out as if venting his anger, Masayuki stormed off with loud and clear footsteps, pausing to angrily reprimand the jutsu-shi who were looking at each other curiously.

"Will you hurry up!"

"G-Got it!"

Watching Masayaki and company retreat in a huff, Ayano let out a sigh.

"Finally gone."

At such a frank reaction, Kirika asked, smiling, "You seem to hate that old man a lot, don't you, Ayano-chan?"

"Do you even need to ask! Someone who intends to harden his heart and kill his daughter "for the survival of his clan"… There is no need to put up with him!"

"Well in my case, it doesn't matter as long as the Soushu is happy. Besides, do you really see a future for that guy?"

Ayano could only shrug her shoulders with a bitter smile.

"All I can say is that Father has no intention of destroying the Oogami family."

Even so, as the head of the clan he can't push all the responsibility onto someone else! Masayuki should know this is the head of his own family!

"'The one who is to take responsibility exists precisely to take up the responsibility'… I'm rather fond of that saying. By the way, do you really intend to fight with Kazuma?"

Kirika nodded as if deep in thought, and then suddenly changed the subject. Despite being slightly at a loss, Ayano still replied honestly, "Yeah, there is no one else after all. Though I may not be able to win, I can try to buy time."

"…You don't have to push yourself so hard. There is no shame in losing to that man."

"I know. I don't intend to put my life on the line for it. Besides, I have this kid with me."

She patted Ren's head, who had been silently standing beside her. He looked at Ayano in surprise.

"Huh..? Me too..?"

Without answering, Ayano changed her kind hand on Ren's head into a wicked claw. A sharp pain shot through Ren.

"O-Ouch! That hurts Onee-sama!"

"Let's work hard together, Ren! ◎"

"O-Okay…"

Ren could only give in to the fear and pain, nodding with tears in his eyes.

Part 2

"Thank you for your hard work."

Kirika smiled sweetly in gratitude, eliciting an instant greeting from the police officers.

The police roadblock shift slightly, opening a small gap large enough for a single person. Passing through that small gap, Kirika, Ayano and Ren entered into the secured zone.

"…What a thorough job," Ayano conceded with shock, looking with wonder at their surroundings.

The normally bustling city corner had been transformed into a literal ghost town. Not only were there no pedestrians, even the people inside the buildings seemed to have been all cleared away.

Kirika shrugged her shoulders lightly.

"Actually we only evacuated a few people. Most of the people sensed an abnormality and escaped before we did anything."

"An abnormality…?"

Catching what seemed link the odor of rotten fish in the wind, Ayano frowned. The asphalt road surface felt strangely gooey. With every step, her sole seemed

to be glued to the ground by a thin, sticky thread. Perhaps because of the earth's corruption, the trees in the park tilted at a dangerous angle under the wind's blow, as if they would topple any moment.

"It is rather common nowadays to hear others say that humans are a type of animal that has lost its basic instincts. But judging from this, it seems we have not completely lost them after all. Just think about it, isn't it strange that no civilians or reporters have come to investigate the inspection area?"

"—Now that you mention it, it seems to be that way."

Ayano recalled the scene when they were passing through the checkpoints. The manpower present for this operation almost seems excessive for the empty streets, which would definitely arouse suspicion. Normally, Ikebukuro would never be so quiet with a police cordon set up.

(Normally, huh…)

Faced with a meaningless imagination, Ayano couldn't help but reveal a bitter smile. In a situation where youki causes the wind and earth to be corroded,

it isn't even appropriate to think of the word "normal."

It was convenient of the civilians to notice the unnaturalness and escape. This way they wouldn't have to worry about witnesses or casualties, and fight as they wished.

She grinned inwardly, and walked towards the center of the secured zone. The small church here was perhaps the farthest away from the word "Holy" in the world!

The preparations for battle were ready at the target area. Ten jutsu-shi surrounded the church, not letting even an ant through.

Sensing Ayano's approach, Masayuki turned around.

"Ayano-sama and Ren-sama, please do not take part in this operation.

"I know."

Ayano impatiently waves her hand towards Masayuki who reminded them once more.

The jutsu-shi are concentrating, waiting for Masayuki's signal. He knows that Misao is waiting inside,

and at this stage he does not intend to spend more time searching the interior.

He plans to burn down the entire church.

If ten Kannagi jutsus-shi were to release flames all at the same time, this kind of building would be destroyed before it even began burning.

It would be best if the matter could be settled just with this. In the case that she survived, they would follow the plan and force her into the park and eradicate her.

There exists no element nor chance of failure. Everyone believed firmly in their victory.

"Okay, begi…"

Right before Masayuki gave the go signal, the door of the church opened slowly. Masayuki quickly stopped his hand, and stared closely at the door.

Following a sharp squeaking sound, the door opened gradually. They were unable to see the interior at all, the darkness within rejecting the entry of all light.

On top of that, the darkness even began infesting the light. A certain black object passed through the front door, and appeared in the space filled with light.

It is someone dressed in a pitch black kimono - a black-haired girl wearing funeral robes. The human-shaped darkness eyed the group of people.

"… Are you… Misao…?"

Masayuki called his daughter's name, as if moaning. The immense youki surrounding Misao continued to spread and corrupt the area around her.

"I welcome everyone's arrival. Father as well, I am glad to see that you are still so healthy."

Misao elegantly greeted them, announcing her sincere welcome with a gentle smile.

But anyone who knew Misao would have noticed that something was wrong. In the last ten years or so, Misao had never smiled like this towards Masayuki.

Of course, Masayuki did not even realize this. To him, Misao, who as a woman was not fit to become a fighter, was nothing more than a worthless existence to him.

Staring angrily at the daughter who is smiling innocently, Masayuki shouted from the bottom of his heart, "Silence! A dirty and despicable thing like you is not qualified to call me its Father!"

For a moment moment, the smile in Misao's eyes vanished. But remembering her facade, she returned to her original expression.

"Sorry to have been so rude then. By the way—"

Misao looked around, verifying the faces of everyone at the scene.

"Where is Kazuma-san?"

"That guy has already been dismissed!"

Ayano answered at an astonishing speed.

"Whether he is capable enough is only secondary. We have no intention of hiring someone who does not plan to cooperate with us. This is not charity work."

Looking down on the girl who seemed to have been waiting to say this, Misao's lips curled up in a smile.

Ayano's eyebrows jump up in an instant. Even if it was just for a moment, she saw the meaning behind that smile.

It was a mockery, an expression of contempt that one would only use to look down on others. It was an intolerable expression for a jutsushi from a branch family to make, especially one that has been corrupted into a demon.

"What is so funny…?"

Ayano questions in a suppressed tone.

"The attitude of Ayano-sama is too ugly," Misao replied, still smiling.

- swoosh. Ayano stepped out, leaning her right body into a battle stance. A terrified Masayuki could only jump out of the way.

Ignoring the killing intent directed at her, Misao smiled and said, "Does Kazuma-san caring only for me make you that jealous?"

"—!"

The uprising murderous aura shakes the area, but Misao shows no signs of backing off. Unsure whether she was confident in winning, or had lost her sense of judgement—-

"Very well… Speaking of which, we have yet to settle the score from last time."

"Is that so… I can't recall such a thing."

The face-off was like one of clashing swords. Their exchanged looks alone gave off sparks, building the tension until it seemed ready to explode.

Ayano quietly drew her Enraiha, its golden brilliance exorcising the nearby youki.

Faced with a sudden battle of femme fatales, the jutsushi from the branch families began trembling.

"A… Ayano-sama. Leave Misao to us…"

Masayuki hurriedly tried to halt Ayano, but was silenced by her murderous aura. After all, the level between the two was completely different.

No one can stop them. Just as everyone at the scene is thinking this way—

"Excuse me, sorry to disturb when the two of you are so busy."

With her ear at the mobile phone that is switched to vibration mode, Kirika made a routine announcement.

"Yagami Kazuma has appeared. He is closing in from the direction of the main road."

Ayano's body shook suddenly.

(I'm saved—)

Seeing this reaction, Masayuki sighs in relief.

"Ayano-sama—"

"I know."

Keeping Enraiha raised, Ayano glared at Misao once more. The woman only lifted her chin in a smug grin of victory, noticing Ayano's furrowed brow.

(There should still be time after killing her first…)

For a moment, Ayano considered this seriously. But now that she was calm, her personal feelings came second to the mission.

"Masayuki-san, please act as we have originally planned. Superintendent Tachibana, I will not ask you to fight with Kazuma, but please maintain the spiritual boundary. Okay?"

Ayano gives off commands one by one, and finally shifts her eyes to Ren.

"Let's go stall Kazuma!"

"… Yes…"

Ren droops his eyes, and nods to reply with a helpless tone. Ignoring Ren's attitude, Ayano forcefully dragged him off.

Part 3

"Looks like I'm late, has it already begun?"

Sprinting on the empty streets, Kazuma grumbles, swerving as he turns a corner.

He saw Misao's 'invitation', but noticed it an hour later than Kannagi and the police. There was no special reason for it; he just happened to have fallen asleep.

Even though he leapt out of bed immediately when he sensed the rising youki, he could not deny the fact that he came late. The only good thing about this was that it was happening next to the hotel he was using as a base in his search for Misao.

(Speaking of which, to be located so close… Even though I am not sure who it may be, but he's good.)

Thinking about the real enemy who has yet to reveal himself, Kazuma speeds up. Perhaps due to all his wrong-doings most of the time, he did not reach the destination that easily.

Two shadows stood before Kazuma, stopping him. After identifying them with sharp eyes, he eventually let out a bored sigh.

"Oh, it's you."

"Well, SORRY for being me."

Hearing his disappointed voice, Ayano retorted impolitely in the same manner. She held Enraiha in her hand, her intentions as plain as day.

Leaving that aside…

"Why is Ren here as well?"

"Well, what do you think?"

Ayano opened her palm and slaped onto the bitterly smiling Ren's head. A loud smack echoed through the street

"Obviously, we're working together to beat you up!" Ayano exclaimed enthusiastically, but Ren backed off slightly, shaking his head vigorously from a place that Ayano couldn't see.

Kazuma decided to leave Ren aside for now. Looking straight at Ayano who seemed ready to fight anytime, Kazuma grinned confidently.

"…Are you sure you came prepared?"

A fierce ki enveloped Ayano.

"Argh…"

It's frightening. Kazuma is only standing there, but even that was scary enough already. She was com-

pletely unprepared, as there was not a single hope of victory.

"Even so, I must do this! Because only I can!"

As if trying to throw away her fears and hesitations, she raises the Enraiha with everything she has. She swings down the blade with all her strength.

"Take this..!! KAZUMA!"

A massive plasma body burned the air and sped off. Looking at that object closing in at a high speed, Kazuma effortlessly waved his hand.

The fist entangled with wind sent the plasma bullet flying. The scorching flames veered off at a 90-degree angle, tearing a huge hole in a building caught in the fireball's path.

(As expected, ranged attacks are useless…)

Ayano holds the Enraiha tightly, determined to go into melee combat.

As she gradually reduced the distance between them, intending to jump straight at Kazuma, he suddenly relaxed and took a step back.

"…?"

"I'm sorry to do this when you're all fired up, but I'm in a hurry. I'll play with you next time!"

Leaving this selfish remark, Kazuma rode the wind, flew into the sky… and disappeared. This was done by manipulating the density of air and causing a change in the refraction of light to create an effect of invisibility.

"Huhhh!?"

Ren who is standing further back gives off a sound of surprise. But Ayano has already seen this kind of trick before, and has come up with a method against it.

"Hmph…"

She raises Enraiha slowly.

"Did you think the same trick…"

Just as Fuu-jutsushi observe air flow, En-Jutsushi use fire- heat to see the world. Ayano cannot possibly miss a heat source with more than twice the temperature of the air.

"…would work on me twice?!"

A high-speed plasma bullet fired off, and accurately shot past the invisible Kazuma. Fortunately, for Kazuma, the layer of wind kekkai around him repelled the blast.

"Whoa!?"

Kazuma suddenly appeared in the sky. Having lost the protection of the wind, Fuu-Jutsushi are naturally unable to fly in the air— and will of course fall down.

"Here we go…!"

Just before falling onto the ground, Kazuma regained control of the wind. His body flipped upright as his feet landed softly on the ground.

Looking at the proud Ayano, Kazuma sighed and lectured her, "Didn't I tell you before? If you have time to study small tricks like this, you should go practice your sword skills."

"It doesn't matter. It's pretty useful, after all." Ayano shouldered Enraiha, laughing proudly.

"Are you disappointed that your technique was exposed?"

"…Not really. That aside… what are you going to do now?"

Ayano has already dragged Kazuma onto the ground, so she can use Enraiha to attack directly.

—That is, if she can hit him.

With Ayano's abilities, she can't even touch Kazuma. The difference in power is too great to be bridged by hard work or determination.

However, Ayano's composed smile doesn't fade.

"Did you really think I would go against you without thinking of anything?"

"Yup. After all, you're an animal that moves on instinct," Kazuma replied instantly. A vein rose in Ayano's temple.

"Why, you..! Then, watch this!"

Ayano stretched her hand behind her, thrusting out the 'thing' she grabbed towards Kazuma.

"Ultimate technique! (Ren) Barrier!!"

—(Please wait a moment…)

The stopped time started to flow again.

Kazuma sighs as if emptying his lungs. He looked at Ayano with pity.

"Anyway, explain to me just what on earth you're doing."

"Heh heh heh, no matter how wicked and inhuman you are, I doubt you'd be able to hurt Ren! As long as I have this Ren Barrier, even if I can't win, I definitely won't lose either!"

Hiding behind Ren whose entire body was lifted up by the collar, Ayano declared her stalemate with confidence.

While looking at this scene with a pained expression, Kazuma muttered, "…how should I say this, don't you feel any shame as the next Soushu of the Kannagi?"

"I, for one, am embarrassed…" Hung like a doll that had just been washed, Ren quietly mumbled.

"Shut up! I'll do whatever it takes to win!" Ayano shouted, flustered.

"No, you still can't win. You just won't lose."

"Ah…that's… anyway. If you think you can break through this Ren Barrier, just try it!"

"Sure."

Kazuma effortlessly released blades of wind that, arcing like boomerangs, sliced at both of Ayano's arms from behind.

"Kya!"

Although they didnt't reach the skin, both of Ayano's sleeves were completely shredded, surprising her enough to drop ~~Ren~~ the Barrier.

Ren quickly escapes to a place where Ayano's hands couldnt't reach him. He naturally didn't want to keep working with her.

"Hey, stop right there!"

Ayano tries to chase after Ren, but

— Swoosh!

A blade of wind flying right before the tip of her nose made her stop in her steps.

She happens to look below her feet, and noticed that the surface of the asphalt was smoothly sliced through like butter.

A cold sweat ran down Ayano's back.

"Well, I understand somewhat. Basically, you're just trying to buy some time, right?"

Ayano was frozen, her intentions exposed. Kazuma pronounced coldly, "I think I told you already, but I'm in a hurry to get there. If you keep fooling around… you'll die."

"…!"

As if being pushed by a massive intent to kill, Ayano uses all her strength to move to the side. A blade of wind flew through the place where she had just stood.

This wasn't a threat or an attack meant to disable someone. It was clearly aimed to slice a person in two.

(He's gotten serious…?)

A shiver ran down her back. Ayano prepared to aim for the eyes, and focused every nerve in her body on the enemy in front of her.

Kazuma's attacks don't have any setup time or movements. He can release a lethal strike without even moving a finger. In comparison to dodging attacks like these, dodging bullets is much easier.

Ayano tossed aside her useless defense, prayed to God that she wouldn't suffer fatal injuries, and thrust in a straight line.

Relentlessly striking wind blades continued to extinguish the flames surrounding her entire body. Ayano gave up on meaningless dodging attempts, and closed in on Kazuma in the shortest distance possible.

(…I reached him!)

Within striking distance, the sword is faster than jutsu.

Jutsu is the substantiation of one's will. And so, when one uses jutsu, one must think; that means the signal must cycle through the brain. In comparison,

when the body is using every muscle, sometimes even the most basic will of to 'make the body move' may be left out entirely. For someone whose fighting skills have been trained to a certain extent, they have experienced the feeling of 'striking before thinking'. This speed cannot be surpassed by jutsu. No matter how much one trains, it is logically impossible to active jutsu subconsciously.

Ayano swung Enraiha down forcefully. It would be an understatement to describe the destructive might of the sword as merely "overwhelming." If a human was hit…no, even lightly grazed by it, he would become a piece of charcoal.

Kazuma moved to the left to dodge the slice. Ayano pulled the blade back, reversing her grip, and cut diagonally upwards.

Kazuma dodged left again, simultaneously dashing inside Ayano's guard, who had exposed her torso for the upward slice. Targeting Ayano's right wrist, Kazuma's disarm succeeded and Enraiha dropped from Ayano's hand. If this had been a competition, the judge would have probably announced Kazuma's vic-

tory by now. But, this is an actual battle… and the blade that Ayano wields is Enraiha.

After dodging the palm strike aimed at her chin by twisting her body, Ayano focused her consciousness onto Enraiha. At the same time, the Enraiha that was flying in midair disappeared. Following that, she began collect energy in her chest area. Gripping her empty right hand tightly and focusing that burning, throbbing power within, Ayano once again formed Enraiha in her right hand within the blink of an eye.

She went for a vicious and sudden attack. Even though Ayano thought that her surprise attack was successful, this seemed to be within the opponent's expectations as well. Kazuma bends backwards slightly, the tip of the blade swept by his body by a mere 4 millimeters.

Kazuma leisurely put distance between them once more, a smile appearing on his face. It was undoubtedly a smile of praise, though Ayano failed to realize it.

(Smile all you want!)

Determined to close the distance, Ayano leapt right at Kazuma. She slashed horizontally at Kazuma's

body, and continued to swing as he dodged backwards.

Kazuma eventually backed up against the wall of a building, unable to retreat any further. The joy of having forced the enemy to his end brought a sinister smile to Ayano's face.

(I've got him…!)

All the muscles in her body tensed up, and her condensed power was all released at a single point. The sword tip struck straight at Kazuma's face at the shortest distance possible. There was no way to dodge or defend against the scorching blade; Ayano firmly believed she had won.

A full-powered attack at that detestable face that is always laughing and joking around…

"Wha-"

Ayano's eyes widened as Enraiha stopped dead before Kazuma's face, as if halted by an invisible wall. No matter how much strength she used, the remaining distance of ten centimeters could not be shortened any further.

(A wind kekkai…?)

The truth was before her eyes, but Ayano still couldn't believe believe it. A high level spirit jutsu can surpass physical phenomena— she understood this common knowledge very well. But, just how much willpower must be concentrated to be able to make an air ward that is strong enough to withstand Enraiha? It was utterly incomprehensible to Ayano.

"Well, that's just how it is," Kazuma mumbled as if it were only natural, and the wind kekkai disappeared at the same time. Walking past Ayano who fell forward as was unable to draw her strength back in time, Kazuma used an intolerably arrogant tone to say, "Let's stop here for today."

Ayano was, of course, very agitated.

"Wha..What do you mean by 'stop here for today'!? This is not a practice!"

"I accompanied you for some time already, what else do you have to complain about?"

"This isn't over."

Ayano quickly regained her calm and pointed Enraiha at Kazuma.

"You must stay with me until Misao's punishment is over. Because this problem must be taken care of by our own people."

"You don't have to worry about that, that side can hardly fend for themselves."

"…what do you mean?"

To Ayano's question, Kazuma silently raised three fingers.

"Three? What..?"

Kazuma didn't answer, but instead he retracted his ring finger.

"Two."

Following that, he retracted his middle finger.

"One."

The last one. Kazuma retracts his index finger, showing a faint grin on his face.

"Bang!"

Accompanied by an explosion, a pitch black pillar of fire erupted into the sky.

Part 4

"Wha…"

Ayano stared in awe at the pillar of fire.

Black flames.

Unlike the black smoke created from burning of heavy oil, the flames themselves were black in color.

"Is that… Misao…?"

"Is there anyone else that can use flames that are full of youki like this? Then it seems that the battle style of the Kannagi must have changed quite a bit ever since I left."

Kazuma questioned her seriously. Perhaps he really wanted to know the answer to this question?

"We don't have anyone like that!" Ayano answered rudely. Of course, Kazuma didn't take offense and merely put an indifferent expression, shrugging as he walked off.

"H-hold it!"

Kazuma obediently stopped.

"What's the matter? Is there someone among those people there that you hope will die? Then I don't mind

waiting a bit longer; after all there are only three minutes left."

Ayano took a while to truly understand the meaning behind that sentence. Ren, comprehending his brother, fearfully asked, "Is Misao really that strong? That even ten people working together are still unable to defeat her?"

"Six."

Kazuma corrects truthfully.

"—Huh?"

"After that blast earlier, the presence of four people disappeared."

Ren was struck speechless, and in turn Ayano roared, "You should've said something like that sooner!"

"You should've realized it much sooner."

"Y…you…"

"Calm down, Onee-san."

Ren tried in vain to pacify the near-exploding Ayano as he looked at his brother with blaming eyes.

"Onii-san, why can't you just get along with onee-san?"

"What do you mean by "get along?" Our goals this time are entirely different. She's no friend of mine."

"Don't tell me you still intend to defend Misao!?"

"Yup."

Kazuma nods naturally at Ayano, who stared at him wide-eyed.

"…What are you thinking? Do you know how many people that girl killed!?"

"How would I know? I am not so kind as to pity a bunch of dead strangers."

Kazuma spits this line out easily, and following that walks off without waiting for their reactions. Ayano hurriedly chased after him until she eventually overtook Kazuma.

The park wasn't very far. Even though she ran, she was only faster by around ten seconds. But, that was more than enough.

(Find her, and settle it in one blow!)

She was confident. No matter how strong Misao may have become, compared to herself of the main family, their levels of power were entirely different. Just one strike from Enraiha should be able to eliminate Misao.

Ayano reached the park. She jumped over the fence at the entrance, and ran into the square.

There was no need to search for her, as Misao stood at the centre of the square. Despite being surrounded by jutsushi of the branch families, there was not a single trace of anxiety on her face; on the contrary, it was the jutsushi that seemed to be trembling in fear.

The time to worry over the face of the Oogami was long past. Planning to finish Misao off in one go, Ayano pushed the Jutsushis surrounding Misao aside— and was shocked herself.

Misao did not even notice Ayano's appearance as she happily played with a rubber ball. She wore an innocent smile, and gently dribbled the rubber ball at waist height. The group gaped at this simple repetition without any notion of boredom.

At a second glance, the rubber ball looked very old and tattered, its surface yellowish like the earth. The fading grayish black threads were spread around in great volumes, just like a bamboo curtain falling off continuously. Those wavering black threads, looked just like hair—

(Just like—?)

The instant she realized what that rubber ball was, Ayano felt goosebumps all over her body. Her hand clenched over her mouth, trying hard to keep from vomiting.

The messy black threads— those were the hair of a man just over fifty years of age.

The red threads spread over the soil-yellow surface— those were blood stains splattered on the victim's skin.

The object that Misao was bouncing like a rubber ball was the head of a dead person. The face of the

man who is planning to slay his own daughter for the survival of the family, now rebounded up and down between the ground and the white, tender hand.

Dum…dum…dum…

The sound of the bouncing "rubber ball" was abnormally heavy. Every time it hit the solid ground, more wounds gradually appeared on Masayuki's painful and distorted expression.

Common sense dictates that it is impossible for a human head to bounce like a rubber ball. This may have been caused by psychic powers or something similar to move the head…

"… Misao…"

Ayano was unable to say a word. What could she say to a girl happily playing with her father's head?

Before the eyes of Ayano and company who were staring with their breaths held, Misao bounced the "rubber ball" diligently. If there was any purpose behind this action, that could still have been seen in a more optimistic manner. Like venting her anger on the body, scaring the enemy with her power, or a part of a jutsu ritual— anything else would have been fine. But

this is different. Anyone could tell that this action was meaningless.

She treated it like a child's game. Like a kid using a crumpled piece of paper as a ball, Misao simply treated her father's head as a simple ball.

"…"

Misao suddenly hit the "rubber ball" with force. Jumping higher than before, the "ball" bounced to her chest area, and Misao stretched her hands out to catch it.

"What have you been doing since just now?"

No one understood her murmuring.

Yet, a voice answered in reply.

"It's hard to explain so quickly, but I still rushed here."

Like an avalanche, everyone's eyes gathered at the same direction.

That relaxed expression without any tension did not waver at all under the stare of everyone in the area. Even though he possesses power that surpasses anyone, his demeanor was calmer and firmer than anyone.

Just that cheeky presence was enough to dispel the abnormal demonic aura given off by Misao.

Possessing the power to accept everything, Yagami Kazuma stood before the gathering as if his “right” to power was as natural as the air.

“Looks like I made it in time for the climax.”

Chapter 6: Finale – The Brave and Selfless Rescuer

Part 1

"He" who observed all from the sky, had done so from the very beginning.

For humans, the area directly above them has always been a blind spot. The presence of "he" who lurked among dimensional intervals was undetectable even by the greatest Fuu-Jutsushi.

"He" was content. Everything was proceeding as planned, everyone moving as "he" had expected them to. They were completely unaware that they were pawns, believing that they were acting according to their own will.

Looking down like a god, "he" drank in this feeling of superiority.

(How lucky of me to have picked up such a useful tool.)

Oogami Misao - the first pawn "he" obtained. Blind with hatred, a pawn that bore a special meaning to that man.

"He" thanked the stars - "they" worshipped neither gods nor devils, after all - for guiding such a convenient pawn into his grasp.

From the start, it had never been much more than an amusing game. Assisting that silly child's naive plans for revenge— and at such little cost. Such charitable actions were a favorite hobby of "his". After "he" named his price - a small one, really - an amusing expression that "he" could never get bored of appeared on her face.

Nonetheless, these were all but pointless amusements, because now Misao had already become a sharp blade capable of killing that man.

(Yagami Kazuma— I must eliminate that unforgivable sinner with my own hands. Just what can be more glorious than that…)

Having such a prestigious record, "he" may be bestowed with an extremely high position. Receiving continuous praises, envies and admirations— A future filled with glory.

That is neither a fantasy or a dream, that "tomorrow" that will definitely come about is right before his very eyes.

Of course, the power he has now is not enough, there is no way he can beat that monster head-on. But, he is very confident in his victory.

Even though he is powerful enough to do so, Kazuma can't bring himself to kill Misao. Furthermore, Misao has yet to reach the stage of completion.

(Come on, Misao— Just a little more.)

"He" reveals a smile filled with gentle love at the girl who is walking down the road of destruction.

"…Finally…"

Those red lips give off an agitated voice of happiness.

"This moment has finally arrived…"

"I don't know which moment it is you are referring to, but it is indeed time to settle things."

Kazuma nods, saying this meaningful line.

"I don't really care— But must you kill "that person"?"

"Ahh, you mean "this person"?"

Misao lowers her head to look at her father's head that she is hugging.

"It is only right for the father to avenge his son right? But, not only did otou-san not agree to help me, he even intended to kill his very own daughter, me. So, I decided to just borrow his powers— like this."

Something similar to a powerful current flowered into Misao's hand from Masayuki's head. The skin of the head dries up rapidly, the hair that turned white begins falling off.

In a matter of seconds, the chopped off head became a dried mummy.

"Foolish otou-san."

Misao grapples hard at her father's head. At the same time as it is giving off irritating squeaking sounds, Masayuki's head was crushed into pieces. The pieces were all disintegrated and blown off by the wind before reaching the floor.

"Come on, otou-san— Become one with me, and let's take revenge for onii-san together?"

Absorbing her father— The life of the head of the Ogami, Misao's youki shows an explosive increase.

"Woah!"

"Mmm…"

The remaining Jutsushis moans. Even Ayano stretches her arms before her, taking on a defensive stance.

An abnormally strong youki. Its strength is so, its quality is very ominous as well. This is the power she obtained from draining the lives of over a hundred, countless grudges from the souls are mixed within, it can be considered reasonable in some way.

"The few of you can just get back now!"

Ayano hurriedly warns the Jutsushis. Having evolved to such an immense youki, the powers of the branch family cannot handle it at all.

"B… But…"

"Get back!"

Ayano shouts at those hesitant Jutsushis. The Jutsushis look towards each other.

"—Got it, we will obey Ayano-sama's order."

They discreetly stated that they are obeying orders, and then rushed off the scene.

Following that, Misao's youki began to gather into a bundle. Basked in the youki that seemed as though one would be able to hear the voices of hatred from

the victims, the fire spirits manifested in the form of pitch black flames.

(Oh… That is rather quick…)

Looking at the black fireball created above Misao's head, Ayano is secretly impressed.

Misao stretches her right hand out swiftly, pointing at Kazuma alone. Following that action, the fireball whistles off and closes in at Kazuma.

"…"

Kazuma does not move an inch, staring silently at the fireball that is coming straight at him. Following that— The sound of an explosion can be heard, Kazuma's body is surrounded by pitch black flames.

Misao shows a hearty smile. But, seeing Kazuma covered in flames, there is no change on Ayano and Ren's faces.

The flames disperses slowly. Appearing within is—

"—!"

Even though it may be unsuitable to say this, but it is naturally Kazuma, without a scratch.

"— And then?"

"Grr—"

As if being pushed back by his presence, Misao bites hard at her teeth as she moves backwards, but after that she began gathering youki once more.

"Then— How about this!?"

A black fireball is created above Misao's head once more. Not just one. Two, three— fireballs kept on appearing, each of the fireballs is twice as hot as one just now.

"Wow…" Ren exclaims. "Misao is really talented."

"Yeah. If anyone would still dare to say her personality is not suitable for training now, that would be a joke. If she accumulates experience properly, she would probably have been the strongest Jutsushi among the branch families by now."

Ayano praises Misao's talent without any conservation. Yet, that calm expression is just opposite to what she has just said, she does not see Misao's powers as a threat at all.

Up to ten fireballs came to Kazuma's side one by one. The group of fireballs that has their heat and kinetic energy completely under control, surrounds Kazuma in a hemispherical manner and explodes.

Misao adjusts the direction of the explosion, causing all the energy to be focused within the hemisphere. Being scorched by the great heat, with the merciless pressure from explosion waves from all directions, a normal Jutsushi will probably be completely destroyed, leaving not a single piece of meat behind.

(That is really something. But…)

Needless to say, Kazuma is of course, not a normal Jutsushi. He stands in the interior of the explosion that is gradually dispersing, blocking off the black flames' attack without a sweat.

"How can that be…"

"I say—"

Ayano informs Misao who is dumbstruck there with an impatient tone.

"If Kazuma would die under flames of that level, he would have been killed by me long ago."

"Nee-san… That is a little…"

"The way you handle your attacks is very flexible, but just looking at power alone it is way weaker than Ren. To use that kind of warm flames to kill Kazuma, it will not even be considered a joke to others."

"How can that be… This kind of thing should not happen!"

Faced with those heartless comments, Misao with a great change in her expression tries hard to rebut:

"I have become even stronger than Kazuma-san! I can definitely beat him now, Angel-sama guaranteed that!"

"Angel-sama?"

Ayano stares straight and hard at Misao.

These words sound a little mad, but she does not seem to be joking either.

(It seems something is helping her from behind the scenes— and it is the kind that is not too decent.)

Ayano grumbles in her heart.

"Angel"— What a shameful name. That should not be a real angel, but no matter whether it is a name he gave himself or by others, the moment that person accepts that name readily, he is not decent already.

"Just what kind of pervert is that?"

"It is insulting to call me a pervert."

This answer that bears laughter within came from the sky suddenly.

"…!!"

Ayano raises her head abruptly to look up into the sky. About five meters in the air— There he is.

Ayano stares closely at the youth that is gradually descending from the sky.

"So that's it… An "Angel"…"

His age appears to be around ten. Golden curly hair, round emerald eyes, and a smile filled with benevolence.

That appearance with gentle light coming out from all over his body, it is just like the angel that is drawn on the pictures of religions. If there is background music and songs of praises now, then this would certainly be filled with a solemn atmosphere.

"Angel-sama!"

Misao runs to the youth's side, looking very touched. She does not seem to mind if her kimono is dirtied, she kneels right by his feet entirely.

"Angel-sama, please guide me on what to do, please bestow upon me the way to successfully take revenge."

Like a lost child yearning for his mother, Misao relies on the youth whole-heartedly.

The youth reveals a gentle smile, caressing Misao's head gently, and says:

"There is no such method."

Misao slowly blinks her eyes.

"… Huh?"

"For you to defeat Kazuma Yagami, that is an impossible task."

The youth said every word out very clearly. Everyone else besides Misao begins to notice, that that seemingly loving smile, is actually a joyful expression of torment.

"B… But… Angel-sama told me that I have already obtained enough power for revenge—"

"Oh, you mean that."

The youth nods seriously, then lowers his head to look at Misao. Misao still seem as though she can't believe that the youth betrayed her, her eyes shine with uneasiness.

"That is a lie."

Misao is so shocked she is at a loss for words, and simply widens her eyes. The youth looks at the ex-

pression happily, and then uses an exaggerated tone to ask:

"Why do you seem so surprised? Didn't you not even trust me from the very beginning?"

—For our mutual benefit, let us work together from now on—-

Misao suddenly remembers this line. It was undoubtedly spoken from her very lips. In less than a week's time, she has completely forgotten all about it—

"That's right, we were just using each other, that was the relationship between us. But now you believe in me unconditionally, just what made you that way?"

"T…That is…"

Misao tries hard to recollect her memories, but—

"…"

"It seems you noticed, nothing. But you trust me, why?"

The youth's smile is very gentle all along, the name "Angel" suits it very well.

"You… What did you… do to me…"

"Nothing special, just a little hypnosis. Don't worry, it is dispelled now. And— You have something with me, I shall return it to you as well!"

"— Ahhh!"

Misao uses a very exaggerated motion to dodge the fingers that the youth stretched out at her, as though there is lethal poison at his fingertips.

The youth uses gentle eyes to look at Misao who collapsed to the floor and is unable to get up, moving her hips to try to get away, yet at the same time he raises his stretched out hand up towards the sky.

"Actually there is no need for direct contact."

Snap, the youth's fingers gave off a sound.

"Come, recall. All your actions before today."

"Huh…?"

(All my actions…)

In order to take revenge for my brothers, I killed over a hundred innocent civilians to obtain their vigor—

(But, that was for revenge, it was for a justified cause, so…)

Just as she thought so naturally, her brain seems to have received an impact suddenly.

"So" what?

Because it is for a justified cause, so all those people who were killed would forgive her? And to willingly give their lives up?

That is impossible.

No matter the reason, taking away the lives of others is an undeniable sin, it is an unacceptable action—

— I don't recall hiring dead people—

"No…"

— As long as I continue taking in the vigor of hundreds, thousands of people like this—

"No way…"

— Foolish otou-san—

"No… No way…"

"Angel" made a merciless declaration at Misao who is trying to run away from reality.

"That is right, they were all killed by you."

"Noooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!!"

Misao screams out.

"No way! No way! No way! It's not me! I didn't want to do that kind of thing!!"

"But you still did. In order to obtain power, so you manipulated youma and took away the lives of hundreds, and you won't even spare your very own father."

"—!"

Misao eyes expands to their limit. She raises her head to look at that gentle smile directed at her with extreme fear.

"Ah… Ahh… Ahhhh…"

She thought she was very cautious, and to use him instead. The result from such reckless actions— Is this.

To not realize at all that she is the one being manipulated instead, and killed over a hundred innocent people, and even killing her own father in the end.

Originally intending to take revenge for her family, yet she killed her very family in the process. This can only be described as an extreme irony.

"You worked hard all this time, Misao. By the way—"

The youth asks Misao, who is at a loss thinking about her own sins, with a cheerful smile:

"Your father's vigor, how did it taste?"

"—!!"

Her pupils shrink instantly, sweat coming out from her forehead. The mouth that opened subconsciously gave off a choking moan:

"… Ah… Ah…"

A great power that is way beyond her actual strength residing in her chest. The sound of that beating power became that of an attack, constantly blaming Misao.

The evidence of her sin is so obvious, there is no way she can escape the sound of those grudges coming from within her body.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Misao stretches her five fingers, stabbing them into the centre of her chest. As if trying to use her fingers to pierce through the ribs, digging that dreadful power out together with her heart.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

Misao rolls around on the floor with red eyes as she continued screaming madly.

Part 2

"What did you do…"

Ayano's eyes shift away from the frantic Misao, and in turn stares at the youth.

"What did you do to Misao!?"

"I can't believe someone would complain about me doing that."

Ignoring her fierce eyes, the youth smiles to say:

"Didn't I say that earlier? I am just returning what I held onto back to her."

"What you held onto—?"

"This girl, Misao, is way too soft-hearted, even for revenge, she is unwilling to harm anyone that is not related in any way."

Hearing Ayano's question, the youth cheerfully explains:

"So I took away some obstructing emotions from Misao's heart. Like how to respect others, worries as not hoping to cause trouble for others— Meaning what most would call conscience or ethics?"

"What…"

Such malicious methods left Ayano speechless.

Precisely because of that, Misao took the lives of others without hesitation, and used the reason "for revenge" to justify it.

And then, when Misao's hands are tainted with blood, the emotions that were taken away earlier is put in once more. Converting her back to the kind and gentle Misao who would rather get injured than to hurt others.

All just to mock the way she crumples due to guilt.

"You actually…"

"It is really too interesting."

The youth uses a smile to reply to those blaming eyes, then shifts his eyes slightly.

"So? Are you pleased?"

"…What is it that you want to do?"

Kazuma uses an emotionless tone to ask:

"To put in so much effort, and ruin a person just for fun?"

"That is one of my purposes as well, because I enjoy seeing how people get ruined. Even though very few people would make me put in this much effort, but—"

The youth's smile becomes even more magnificent.

"Yagami Kazuma, to ruin someone that is special to you, won't it be rude if I don't put in more effort?"

The youth's smile is very eerie. Ayano can't help but retreat backwards, Ren on the other hand hides behind Kazuma.

There aren't any changes in his tone and expression at all, but the hatred shown amidst his words, made the two who have no resistance against this kind of eccentric characters feel very scared.

Kazuma knits his brows slightly.

"…Have we met somewhere before?"

"This is the first time we met face to face. But I— We did not forget you even for a second. You must understand, you standing here, alive, are in itself an unforgivable taboo."

The youth voices out to scold him, yet he is unable to move Kazuma in any way.

"And here I was wondering what you wanted to say—"

Kazuma says with an obvious mockery:

"I offended way too many people, so I can't really recall. Ahh, but you don't need to explain any further, I won't recall anyway."

"You won't recall? That is a good thing. The noble name of our master is not something that someone like you should remember, it is best that you have forgotten it."

The youth fights back, taunting Kazuma.

"But as I am benevolent, I shall tell you my name!

My name is Mikaeru! Mikaeru Hari!! In the name of the stars and wisdom, I shall now eliminate our enemy Yagami Kazuma!"

"—!"

Kazuma's expression vanished instantly. He bears that blank expression, as if wearing a mask, and stares at Mikaeru who announced his name with resolution.

— In the name of the stars and wisdom—

Kazuma shut his eyes while facing the youth for a second.

In a certain way, this sentence made Kazuma who he is now. Four years ago— That day, when he experienced for himself that the lack of power can sometimes be equivalent to a sin, "That man" melodiously declared that sentence before him.

— I only seek the truth —

In his hand, he holds the girl whom Kazuma wanted to protect, yet failed to do so, her heart.

When he opens his eyes once more, Kazuma's usual arrogant smile is back. But—

"…"

Ren who stuck behind Kazuma, suddenly let go of his hand that is grabbing the lower part of his jacket, and backs off. Ayano turns her body, switching it to an angle that can see both Kazuma and Mikaeru at the same time.

"Ahh— So that's it."

Silently— Kazuma smiles silently.

"I got it, so you wanted to follow in your master's footsteps?"

At the next moment, Kazuma's "ki" exploded.

"Ahhhh!"

"Wahhhh!"

Multiplied, expanded— it is not such a simple phenomenon. Basked in the pressure of the "ki" that is equivalent to a shockwave, Ren's body began to float.

"Wait…Wait a minite… This is…"

Ayano's expression is very tense. Power of such intensity, she has not seen anything like it even when Kazuma is fighting against Ryuya.

(Just what is this about—!?)

A "ki" that is responding towards his furious roar, the wind begins to spin fiercely. All the energy that is being collected in a bundle is compressed to a scary intensity—

"Fine then— Let me help you. Pray to the demon lord, to bless you such that you would follow your master to hell!"

The wind is released, a supersonic speed wind blade strikes towards Mikaeru rapidly.

"How naïve."

The youth reveals a cold smile, and disappears the moment before he is cut by the wind blade.

"Che! Teleported?"

As if answering Kazuma, Mikaeru's conscious echoed emptily.

"I did not run away, because there is no such need. Why did you think I appeared before you? That is because I am not afraid of you— Because I have obtained enough power to kill you!"

As he makes his declaration loudly, countless goo pieces emerge from the ground surface.

"As you have seen just now, that is not Misao's true power. She is unable to completely control that great power—The method to use that power as one pleases lies within my hands."

"Misao—?"

Without realizing it, Misao's screams had vanished. Ayano looks around, and finds Misao lying on the floor as if dead.

Her chest rises up slightly, but other than that there is no indication of life. The body with sand all over lies motionless, there is nothing reflected in those open, but empty eyes.

The goo pieces quietly crawls forward, pressing onto Misao's body. In the blink of an eye, Misao is wrapped by a small semi-transparent mountain.

"Ah…"

First, the color changed.

The transparency disappeared, the surface began to bear the shine of a metallic surface. That wavering, seemingly soft appearance, with that ironic texture that can reflect light, makes one associate with gigantic mercury.

Then, the shape changed.

The goo pieces that sat still like a bun grew four legs, and lifted its gigantic body, then a head, tail reached out, and its back even grew wings.

The shape-shifting continued to progress.

Its appearance that is rough like the clay product made by a child, slowly and continuously adjusts its shape, gradually possessing a clear outline.

Joints appeared in those legs that were originally but four sticks, and sharp claws grew out of them. The surface of the body is covered closely by scales, a set of skeleton appeared in the interior of the head, tail and wings, evolving into a structure that is very logical in biology.

These changes took no longer than thirty seconds. Within such a short period of time, the semi-transparent slime changed into a huge silvery white dragon.

Ayano grumbles unknowingly:

"… Why does a slime become a dragon upon job changing?"

"You play too many games, idiot."

Kazuma rebuts bluntly.

"That is just changing into a form suited for combat, it is not a real dragon."

In the end it is just an imitation. The shape of a dragon does not possess much meaning. Compared to its appearance, the main point lies in that all the slimes combined into one.

A single slime is just like trash, but when a number of them gathered, they can form a magical circuit. And, by connecting the different circuits with each other, a more complicated, bigger system can be formed.

A system so big that it can control the massive power that Misao has gathered.

"Hahahahahaha! How's that, Yagami Kazuma! Can you defeat this "Vritra" that I created!?"

Mikaeru's voice came from the gigantic dragon—It seems its name is Vritra—'s back region. That puny body is more than half submerged into Vritra's body.

"But then, by defeating it, Misao would die."

After tossing this vicious sentence, the youth is completely merged with Vritra. The statue-like Vritra began to move.

"GRRRR…"

Vritra's gigantic mouth gave off a low groan. Its wings spread out completely, the lowered head is raised upwards, looking at the sky proudly.

"WRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR—-!"

As if challenging the skies, the gigantic dragon roars loudly.

The coarse roar that is like a broken bell slowly becomes clear.

This may be proof that Mikaeru has began controlling Vritra. That clear sound that is like striking against crystal, reminds one of his high pitch voice.

To kill him before he takes action— Normally Kazuma may just do so without hesitation, yet this is one of those rare exceptions. He looks up at the silvery white dragon. From the way he looks, there doesn't seem to be any signs of him wanting to attack it.

"So, what to do…"

Ayano voices out to question Kazuma who is talking to himself:

"You still intend to save Misao?"

"Yes."

Kazuma replies without any hesitation.

Ayano frowns and looks at Kazuma. After understanding all the truth behind it, she does not have any unpleasant emotions against Misao anymore, but—

"Listen, even though you may not want to heed what I say… But, judging from Misao's current situation, won't she be happier if she dies?"

She has nothing now. Everything has been taken away by Hyoue, Mikaeru, and— Kazuma.

Just remembering her scream then, Ayano's chest felt as though it is being squeezed tightly.

Maybe it really is possible to save Misao from the clutches of Mikaeru. But, would that be the result that she would want?

Even if she survived, all that awaits her in the future, won't it be only days tormented by guilt?

"… Perhaps so!"

She had originally expected Kazuma to be angered, but he agreed unexpectedly.

"But, even so…"

There is soil in his mouth, as he raises his head to look up at that back.

That tiny body can't stop trembling.

But the girl still spread her arms courageously, determined to stand before him.

— Please stop! This is really too much! —

The girl uses a tone that is close to bursting in tears to beg. Even if she is right— No, Precisely because it is right, that is why it would not be accepted by others, this was such a sentence.

Even if she is stared at, even if she is blamed, the girl still did not back off.

Her entire body trembled, a tiny back.

Burned into his blurred eyes, the one single time ten years ago that—

"Even so, I still hope that she will live on…"

"…"

"…"

Hearing Kazuma murmur to himself as if praying, Ayano and Ren can't help but wonder if they had heard right.

Especially Ren. He had even forgotten to hide his shocked expression, and stares at Kazuma dumbly with his mouth wide open.

Kazuma stares at his dumbfounded brother.

"What? Is there something strange?"

"Huh…? Ah, no, there is nothing strange at all."

Ren shakes his head hurriedly. At the same time as his tiny head wavers, his eyes also stares straight at the silent Ayano who bears a complicated expression.

"—What?"

Sensing Ren's stare, Ayano asks impolitely.

"N… Nothing… Nothing at all."

Ayano turns her back against the stuttering Ren, looks at Kazuma and says calmly:

"There is nothing wrong with that. Let's go save her! I will act according to your instructions."

"Is that so."

Kazuma acts almighty, and nods his head as if that is how things should be. Ayano did not feel angry towards his attitude, but calmly listens to his plans.

"So then what should we do? If we do not know where Misao is, I cannot burn that thing up at one go. Should I start burning it slowly from the sides?"

"Why go to such trouble… The purifying flames are used at times like this. If you just burn off all the youki, all that remains would be the living Misao. Simple right?"

"I can't perform such a high level trick."

"— Ah?"

Kazuma stares straight at Ayano who replied instantly. He seems to be really shocked, his eyes shifted away from Vritra.

"What did you say?"

"I said, I do not know that kind of high level technique that can burn youki only."

"…"

After staring at Ayano blankly for some time, Kazuma looks towards Ren for a shred of hope. Ren shakes his head hurriedly in denial.

Kazuma sighs out deeply, grumbling in his mouth:

"…Good-for-nothing…"

"Sorry for that."

Ayano humphs and flicks the hair that is stuck on her cheek towards the back.

"Damn! If my old man is here, this could be done so easily… Why is it that he is not around at crucial times like this?"

"What do you mean by why— You were the one to beat him up remember? He is still in the hospital now."

"… Nii-sama, that is really willful for you to say that."

The two's simultaneous rebuts were completely ignored by Kazuma.

"Oh well, There is no point in wishing for things that just isn't there. It is better to have something than none, you can start burning from the side then!"

Just as those words left his mouth.

"Is your little discussion finally over?"

A laughter suddenly sounded off from above them. Raising their heads, they see the gigantic dragon using that big face that is of the size of a small lorry to look at them.

Those eyes are a bright emerald green— Just like Mikaeru's. That emerald luster that is reflected on that

large silvery white body is undoubtedly the proof that the gigantic dragon's body is under complete control of the dark mage.

"It should be about time that we begin.""

"It has begun long ago, you idiot."

Faced with that will that can't wait to start the fight, a mocking voice and a wind blade responded to it at the same time. The wind blade did not let Vritra have any time to react, and sliced off both its wings entirely.

The sliced off wings changed back into the transparent slimes upon leaving the dragon's body. The slimes crawled forward on the ground surface, and then stuck onto the dragon's legs, combining with the dragon directly from that spot.

After several seconds, wings sprouted from Vritra's back once more.

"That was mean."

With a meaning completely different from what he said, Mikaeru announces unhurriedly:

"And I was waiting so patiently for you guys. Yet to sneak attack without even shouting start, how despicable. You really have no sportsmanship."

"Oh really, you flatter me."

Kazuma acts humble, looking serious. The word "despicable" is but a praise to his ears.

"Next it shall be my turn!"

Vritra draws in one deep breathe. As if it really possesses lungs, its chest area begins to inflate.

After the crystal-like transparent teeth bite against each other, hot sparks were flared out in its mouth. All the air that filled the entire chest was blown out at the same time.

Dragon's breath.

Pitch black flames stretched out in a straight line, passing through where the three were just now.

"Dragons can breathe fire. This guy really faithfully acts as how a dragon should be."

Kazuma murmurs as he flies backwards. Vritra turns its head in pursuit of Kazuma, the shining black flames burns the air, following closely behind Kazuma.

"How persistent!"

Kazuma waves his right hand horizontally, the wind generated by this action blows the flames that

are closing in at him off. At the same time, an upward wind strikes at Vritra's chin like an uppercut.

Kachunk, the dragon's mouth is closed up, the dragon's breathe naturally stops as well. Kazuma lands onto the ground unhurriedly.

"Did you expect something like that can defeat me? If so, you are really underestimating me too much!"

"We were just getting to the good part!"

Vritra roars as a strike from its front legs rushes at Kazuma.

The five hooked claws at its feet, each of them possesses a length and sharpness similar to a katana. There is perhaps no organism on earth that can get hit by such a strike and still possess a full corpse!

Faced with the attack coming in horizontally, Kazuma calmly calculates the distance and dodges it easily. Having its full-scale attack dodged by the opponent, Vritra's body began wavering, having lost balance.

"You fell for it."

With its back towards Kazuma, Vritra bears its teeth and smirks. With the centrifugal force that comes

with making a semi-circular rotation, its tail was flung out with a devastating force.

Kazuma originally intended to use wind blades to cut the tail off, but at the last moment he decided not to.

That tail that is like a log, its size is enough to contain a person within, and he cannot be certain that Misao is not inside.

"—-Che!"

He jumps up to evade, but he was just a little too late. The tail swept past the tip of his feet, Kazuma who was in the air, his body began rotating vigorously.

"Nii-sama!"

Ren releases fire pellets at Vritra who intends to follow up on its attack. The golden flames hit the neck portion of the gigantic dragon—but are reflected off by the silvery white scales.

"Huh!?"

"Quit meddling around!!"

Ren jumps backwards, attempting to dodge the backhand claws. However, pitch black fireballs were released from the tip of Vritra's claws.

“—-!!”

Ren who is in mid-air is unable to dodge at all. Seeing Ren who hurriedly intends to use his hands to defend, Kazuma who regained his posture shouts out loudly:

"Don't block it! Get away!"

This is an impossible request, the black flames mercilessly wraps around Ren's arms.

That filthy thing that bears youki can no longer be associated with the word fire, it is just a boiling hot mass of filthy particles.

Having its properties changed to such an extent, the spirit's blessings are unable to take effect. The black flames mercilessly erode the body that can originally resist against fire.

"Wahhh!"

"Ren!!"

Vritra uses its huge body to stand before Kazuma who is rushing to his brother's side.

"Get lost—!!"

"GRRRRYYYYYYYWWWWW!!"

The shockwave met the dragon's breathe head-on. Though the wind sliced the black flames apart, the weakened shockwave is insufficient to send Vritra's huge body off.

"Don't block my way—"

Kazuma waves his hand out once more. However, Vritra takes in a huge breath as well, preparing to spit

fire. Ignoring the opponent's actions entirely, Kazuma acts on his own and begins to gather wind blades.

Yet, just before the conflict happens again, a plasma ball from the side sent Vritra flying. The huge body that has a weight greater than a blue whale, is now flying in the air like a stray cat being knocked down by a car.

"— Ayano?"

"Leave this to me."

Ayano uses a monotonous voice to say, and then began closing in onto Vritra. She does not even look at Kazuma, and waves Enraiha calmly.

"…?"

Though Kazuma is very puzzled by that cold behaviour, but right now Ren's situation is more important. He leaves Vritra to Ayano, and runs to the side of Ren who is sitting on the floor.

"Are you still alive, Ren!?"

"Ah, yes… I survived somehow. But, my flames actually bounced off…"

"Well, since it is using Misao as its core, so its fire resistance probably increased as well."

In fact, it is too humble to say that it "probably increased as well". Having taken that attack from Ayano earlier, there is not even a trace of burnt mark on those silvery white scales. Just looking at its fire resistance, Vritra is comparable to a member of the Kannagi main family.

(… That is to say, I cannot expect much from the two of them, and that I must take care of this myself? And to add on to that, this is free service.)

Kazuma indulges in depressing thoughts as he checks Ren's injuries.

He was burnt from the back of his hand to his elbow, but it will not place his life in danger. Ren seems to have used his own flames to nullify the attack.

"Hmm— It looks fine. This should not leave a scar."

Seeing that the injury is lighter than what he had expected, he relaxes and caresses Ren's tiny head.

"You can back off now, just leave everything else to Ayano and me."

"I still can fight!"

Ren shouts out instantly. He raises his head and uses determined eyes to look at the surprised Kazuma.

"I still can fight, I cannot back off just because of a small injury like this."

"—"

Kazuma looks straight at his brother, who possesses a strong will to fight, for some time— and then places his hand on Ren's head once more.

"I want to save Misao, lend me your strength!"

"Yes!"

Ren nods with pride. At this moment—

"GRRRRLLLLYYYY—!!"

Vritra's roar shook the air. Ren looks towards that direction, and subconsciously widens his eyes.

A glowing magical formation suddenly appeared on the ground surface, and began to wrap by the side of the gigantic dragon that is giving off a silvery white glow.

The hexagonal formation that has two circles of different diameters at the center slowly begins to spin. As the volume of the roar increases, the glow becomes more glaring, lightning running at the surface.

The lightning that is rampaging on the ground surface created countless lightning balls, floating around Vritra. The lightning balls that are connected to each

other by thin lightning, is just like an electric prison trapping a gigantic dragon.

"GYYYR!"

With its short cry as a signal, all the lightning balls shot off at the same time. There were no fixed targets, just a bunch of lightning balls being shot off in a wide area, following an unpredictable route to strike at Ayano.

"Onee-sama!"

Ren cries out loudly. At this moment, Ayano uses a speed faster than the speed of sound to sprint out.

Up against the lightning balls that are falling down like rain, the tiny body speeds within their gaps at a godly speed.

An emergency stop that brings down her speed in an instant, a sharp directional change that goes against the law of inertia, and an amazing acceleration to speed up to her limit in an instant, Ayano illustrates such a body motion that can be called a miracle. The countless lightning balls are unable to touch their target at all, and begins to lose their energy like that.

After passing through the torrent of lightning, Ayano buries herself into the chest of Vritra. She

dodges the claws and tail that strike at her with ease, and jumps onto Vritra's back at the same time, using the entire weight of her body to stab Enraiha downwards.

Kachun!

A solid sound sounded off, the tip of Enraiha pierced through the silvery white scale.

Damage of this level, is nothing but a needle prick to Vritra. This is not Ayano's real intention.

"— Huuu!"

As she breathes out, fire spirits are injected into the gigantic dragon's body from the tip of Enraiha. And then, ignited.

"GWYYYYYYYYY!"

Even the sturdy scales seems fragile under the explosion from within the body. A gap big enough to contain a person within was made on the back of the dragon by the explosion.

"GRRRRWWWWWWWWW!!"

Vritra gives off an angry roar as it twists its body. Ayano dodges the randomly waving claws and tail calmly, and pulls a distance from Vritra once more.

"— Onee-sama is so powerful…"

After witnessing Ayano's astonishing strength in battle, Ren gasps. Yet, Kazuma beside him seems to look displeased.

"That girl… What the hell is she thinking?"

Ren thought that he was commenting on Ayano, and speaks in her aid hurriedly:

"B…But! Misao is also a Jutsushi of the Kannagi, she will probably not be killed by that hit earlier—"

"I don't mean that, that kind of fighting style is too reckless. She has completely given up on defense—Does she want to die?"

Kazuma's voice did not carry any joke or mockery. Ren shivers, and looks at Ayano who consistently performs kamikaze style attacks.

"Onee-sama…!"

Part 3

Ayano did not have anything else on her mind, focusing solely on waving the Enraiha.

Not thinking about anything at all, not hesitating, just focusing on fighting alone. She had had thoughts of showing some mercy, but she forgot about that instantly. Besides, if she goes easy against Vritra which possesses superb fire resistance, she won't be able to do so much as to scratch it.

Wielding the divine blade that is shining with brilliance, Ayano became a weapon.

Perhaps due to this, her mental capabilities were raised to a level beyond any before. So much so that she can accurately predict the movement of those thunderballs almost at the speed of light.

Ayano dodges the furious waves of attacks by her agile movements alone. She did not have any efforts to spare to defend, and instead transfers all her energy into Enraiha's blade.

To run even further.

To move even faster.

Without any considerations at all regarding how to protect herself, just viciously and calmly attacking the enemy. The way she is now is no different from a fighting machine.

She dodged the claws and teeth by several millimeters, and thrusts the Enraiha at the root of Vritra's tail. The fire spirits that entered through the sharp tip, materializes into its golden flame form.

"GRRRYYYYWWWWWWW!!"

Dragging its tail that has more than half of it blown off, the giant dragon roars loudly. Ayano attacks once more fearlessly, and slices off the tail that is as big as two people hugging together entirely.

The severed tail loses its silvery white shine, turning back into a semi transparent goo piece. But that was for just a moment— The goo piece that attaches itself with Vritra, transforms back into the shape of a tail as if nothing has happened.

The gigantic dragon bares its crystal teeth to smirk. The body that has completed its regeneration shines with a silvery white glow, there is no trace of the damage done to it earlier.

"_"

Ayano silently brings up her Enraiha. Even after witnessing the seemingly infinite regeneration capabilities, her will to fight has not wavered one bit.

That is of course. A machine does not fear, a weapon does not hesitate, nor think at all—

— Why are you so concerned about Misao? Is it because… You like her?

That kind of thing does not matter anymore. No matter who is in Kazuma's heart, a machine would not be bothered by it at all.

— Even so, I still hope that she will live on…

A fighting machine that will neither waver, nor feel at a loss, does not require a heart that would be disturbed by a mere sentence.

Ayano steps onto the ground with force, plunging at Vritra's chest.

Vritra's hooked claws strike at Ayano at the same time, sandwiching from both directions, left and right.

For that massive size, such an action may be considered very swift, but to Ayano now, it was as if it is still.

Ayano slices the middle and ring finger of the right hooked claw off, passing through the gap that she has just created, and took a detour, getting to Vritra's back.

Yet, this is a miscalculation that cannot be any more obvious. Because Ayano still does not know, that Vritra is a combination of magical beings, and that this dragon outer appearance is but a form it took up.

Something like a tentacle grew out from somewhere around dragon's right elbow suddenly. The sharp tip did not have a moment of hesitation, as it flies straight towards Ayano.

Her accelerated senses can already feel this gradually stretching tentacle, its distance is less than one meter away.

(…It's unavoidable.)

Ayano calmly admits this fact.

Even though her senses are accelerated, her motion will not be accelerated along with it. In this air that is sticky and gluey like tar, Ayano's movements are slower than that of the tentacle.

The tentacle aims directly and accurate at the dead centre of Ayano's body, causing Ayano to be unable to dodge by merely twisting her body around. At this rate, the tentacle will clearly and surely pierce through Ayano, and dealing her a fatal injury.

Ayano closes her eyes gently, quietly accepting the unavoidable "death".

"…Ugh!?"

Padong!

This is definitely not the feeling of a murderous weapon stabbing into the body. It felt just like someone's body come crashing into her—-

"Are ya still sleeping!? Wake up! You dumb girl!"

"Ahh!?"

The angry shout by her ear pulled Ayano back to reality. She opens her eyes, Kazuma's angry expression appears ten centimeters before her eyes.

"Ka…Kazuma!?"

The negative feelings she had ten seconds ago vanished without a trace.

This is the shocking reality, her conscience was drawn in by the glow in those eyes before her, the throbbing in her heart cannot be suppressed.

(Was he the one who saved me…?)

On that expression that is tense with nervousness, he lost his usual smile. Seeing the sweat that is coming out from his forehead, Ayano showed a smile.

Looking at the smiling Ayano, Kazuma—

"Argh!?"

Pinches her nose.

"What are you staring blankly at? Didn't I tell you to wake up?"

"Who… Who said I was sleeping!"

Ayano flings that hand away, but did not let go of the hand that Kazuma is hugging tightly. Their bodies are flying several tens of meters in the air. In the sky that is even higher and further up than Vritra's head.

(I don't have a choice.)

Ayano finds an excuse for herself, and then hugs Kazuma's body even more tightly. She subconsciously look towards Kazuma's back.

"…Behind you!"

Before Ayano shouted, Kazuma had already turned his body agilely in mid-air. Following that, he saw countless tentacles stretching towards the two of them from all over Vritra's body.

"Che—"

Kazuma raises his right hand at the tentacles— but his body tenses up suddenly for some unknown reason. The wind spirits that had originally gathered at his right hand disperses immediately after going out of control.

He summons the wind once more. Yet— The tentacles was quicker.

(Doomed!)

Right before the eyes of Ayano who once again prepared herself death, golden flames burnt off the countless tentacles.

"Great job. Ren, you did us a great favor."

Kazuma shows a bitter smile, his mouth not forgetting to praise Ren. Looking downwards, Ren is standing on the floor with his hands high up with a prideful smile.

Kazuma reduces the speed of descent, landing cautiously. But at the moment before the landing, he was unable to support Ayano's body weight and lost balance.

"Yoshh—"

"What's the matter?"

Witnessing Kazuma's rare stumble, Ayano gives off a simplistic smile. However, at the moment when she landed, she accidentally felt that warm texture at her lateral abdomen, her expression changes entirely.

She raises her hand hurriedly. Just as she thought, her entire palm is stained red.

"Wait… Wait a minute, you're injured…"

"I'm fine, this is nothing."

Kazuma uses his hand to press against the wound, then says with a calm expression on his face.

But Ayano does not believe one bit of what he just said. If it is just a minor wound, it would be impossible that Kazuma failed to control the wind, and it would make even less sense that he is unable to even support Ayano's weight.

With his back facing Ayano who seems to still want to ask some questions, Kazuma confronts Vritra. Obviously, he shows no signs of backing off. His determined resolve to "definitely save Misao" can be seen from the shadow emitted by his back.

And thus, her tone became very unfriendly naturally.

"Why did you save me? You even got yourself injured for that."

"You didn't want me to save you?"

Needless to say, that is not the answer Ayano was hoping for. Ayano thought that he was trying to change the topic, so her attitude became even more willful.

"No one asked for your help, I did not want someone like you to save me at all!"

Hearing such an ungrateful speech, even Kazuma can't help but be a little enraged. Yet the still angry Ayano failed to notice Kazuma's expression.

"You are the one who wanted to be a busybody, yet you still want to look as though you are the savior! You only have Misao in your mind, then don't come bothering me, just think about how to save Misao!"

"Even if Misao is saved, it would be pointless if you died."

"…Huh?"

Ayano ponders about what that sentence means—No matter the conclusion, she flushes red completely.

"Wha…What! You want to be a two-timer!? I will absolutely not allow this kind of thing!"

(Chinese text used is “You want to step on two boats at the same time!?”)

“Ahh, two-timing, three-timing, they are all the same! Because I have enough power to protect them all!”

(Chinese text used is “Be it two boats, three boats, they are all the same!”)

“…Huh? Protect…?”

(Wait… This means…)

Up to this point, Ayano finally realized that she has misunderstood completely. But Kazuma has yet to finish what he wants to say.

“It is not because I am chosen that I was given power! But to not lose again, to not let others take everything away— I have already decided on that! I will not give up on anyone! I will save Misao! And I won’t let you and Ren die either! I’m gonna kill that arrogant kid! Total perfection! That is the only result I will accept! You got a problem with that?!”

“Ah… No… Not at all.”

Faced with that imposing aura that doesn’t even allow the slightest of doubts, Ayano unknowingly re-

plies politely. And as she was replying, she felt her expression loosen up gradually.

"Let's forget about whether it has reached the level of love, but anyway you have created him to have a liking towards you. So there is still a chance!"

Ayano suddenly recalls what Nanase said then, her sixth sense has always been so accurate.

Kazuma sees her as "someone that he must protect". Just this alone, all the negative feelings that has been stuck up in her heart disappeared.

She lifts her head to see Vritra who is fighting against Ren. Maybe it is just her imagination, but the opponent looks so much smaller as compared to just now. She does not even think that she would lose.

Placing her eyes back onto Kazuma, Ayano smiles and says:

"Come, let's finish this quickly and then go home. Kazuma— Kazuma!?"

Her voice raised by an entire scale. In the few seconds that her eyes left Kazuma, Kazuma— That almighty Kazuma actually kneeled onto the floor entirely. She looks at the incredible sight with a pale look on her face.

"Kazuma! Ka—"

Ayano who panicked for a moment, finally recovers upon seeing that pool of blood at her feet.

There is no time to be shocked. This amount of blood loss— Not good at all.

Even though he commands overwhelming power, he is still mortal. He will still die when faced with dying situations, a critical amount of blood loss cannot be compensated by mental strength.

Ayano doesn't mind getting blood onto her clothes at all, and goes up to kneel by Kazuma's side.

"Kazuma?"

"I'm fine."

"What do you mean by fine—"

Ayano swallows the words that almost spilled out from her mouth.

Within those quiet eyes looking upwards, a strong and undying determination can be seen within. Those eyes beats any language or words, and stops any refutes.

(It won't work…)

There is no need to even ask, Ayano understood in an instant. Just looking into those eyes, anyone would have had thought the same thing!

—Nothing can stop him.

"Move aside."

Kazuma seems to feel impatient towards the motionless Ayano, and began to take action. He grabs Ayano by her shoulder, wanting to force her aside—Yet that strength is pathetically weak.

Ayano breathes out lightly, and then gently removes the hand pressing against her shoulder. Instead she grabs Kazuma by his arm, who's about to collapse, and pulls him to her side.

"You—"

"Stop your bleeding first!"

Ayano says to Kazuma who is staring at her with a fierce look.

"—Ahh?"

"I said "Stop your bleeding"! At the rate it is going, you would die within five seconds of the battle. At least cover that wound on the outside, then try to think of some way to recover your energy. Ren and I will support buy you the time to recover."

"What the hell are you talking about, how can I leave it to you two."

Kazuma ignores Ayano's kind suggestion, and tries to force his legs to stand up. At this moment—

"You idiot! That is enough!"

Ayano finally got angry. She grabs Kazuma's collar, then pulls him back with force. Kazuma's knee loses strength once more, and falls into the pool of blood.

"What can you achieve by dragging that dying body! To just say you did your best when you lost every ounce of energy, so as to satisfy yourself, and then die just like that? Don't make me laugh!"

Ayano continues to grab his collar, shaking Kazuma continuously. This is way too vigorous for someone who is badly wounded, but Ayano in her anger is not in the mood to care about such things.

"You want to save Misao right? You want to protect me and Ren right? Since you dare say "to protect everything", then do what you said you would! Don't you dare use death to run away! I will definitely not let you get away so easily! We will both leaving you your share, so back off until you can move with ease!"

"…"

For a while, Kazuma stares dumbfounded at Ayano who is so angry she is about to cry—

"Wai…Wait…What are you doing…!?"

And then hugs her tightly.

Ayano's ears turn red completely, her body tenses up entirely. She opens her mouth wanting to say something, but due to the sudden shock, her thoughts cannot be conveyed into words.

"…Kazuma?"

While she was being hugged, Ayano notices that Kazuma's body trembles from time to time. She originally thought that it was due to the pain from the wound, but it seems slightly different.

It would be quite a while later that she realizes that this was him laughing to himself.

"—Kazuma?"

Hearing that low and threatening questioning, Kazuma answers, still with a bit of that laughter left on his face:

"No, I was just thinking— You might become a fine woman in the future."

Hearing such sudden words of flattery, the temperature of Ayano's face went even higher. But to be able to express her joy frankly, Ayano still lacks some experience.

"Might? A fine woman? What a joke! I will definitely become a top class beauty! When that time comes, it would be too late for you to regret not having realized my potential!"

"That is hard to say, there are a lot of people who are younger than you that are already women. This has nothing to do with virgin or not, but as long as you keep thinking "someday", you will never be a grown up."

"…You sure are talkative for a dying man."

Kazuma smiles against that weak rebuttal, and makes a declaration:

"Five minutes."

"—Huh?"

"Five minutes, buy me some time."

"Is five minutes enough? Ten minutes, or maybe twenty would be easier—"

"Five minutes."

Kazuma holds his ground, repeating himself once more. This is not the minimum time required, but probably that the maximum amount of time he is willing to suppress his pride is five minutes?

"Fine, fine."

Ayano replies simply, as if hoaxing a child, and then stands up. She walks straight at Vritra, but turns around again after a few steps.

She lowers her head to look at Kazuma who is placing "ki" into his palm and began healing his wound.

"—What?"

"I just wanted to ask you— You have never thought about sacrificing yourself to save Misao, did you?"

As if trying to seek the true meaning to her words, Kazuma stares at Ayano, the side of his lips rises up suddenly.

"I—"

That originally frowning, serious look that doesn't befit Kazuma is gone. He uses an arrogant, invincible and easy smile— the one Ayano is most familiar with, the expression that suits Kazuma the most, to reply:

"—I don't like dying."

“Great!”

Ayano smiles happily, and runs off without turning her head.

Running towards the battlefield.

Part 4

"GRRYYWWWWWW!!"

Ren jumps to avoid Vritra's dragon breathe. Without a care for his pride, he runs away everywhere, and timing it to release flames when the breathe pauses from time to time.

Perhaps to try to imitate Kazuma's wind blade, the sharp and tiny golden flames he gathered, move into Vritra's mouth in a manner leaving a laser-like trail behind.

In the blink of an eye, the golden brilliance explodes within Vritra's mouth. Seeing the huge dragon that tries hard to shake its head in order to put out the flames, Ren begins to adjust his irregular breathing.

Seeing that, the impressed Ayano praises:

"My, you are quite good at fighting."

Hearing the voice behind him, Ren turns his entire body vigorous to the back.

"Nee-sama!"

But that originally bright and delightful expression soon changed to worry. Seeing the blood stains at

Ayano's feet and clothes, Ren asked in a trembling voice:

"Nii-sama, he…?"

"He is off the scene for now, but he will be back very soon."

Even hearing Ayano's ascertained explanation, Ren's expression did not ease up. Ayano imitates Kazuma, and uses a slightly rough motion to caress Ren's head.

"Believe in him, your brother is a very strong guy."

This is definitely not a consoling sentence that is said without basis. Kazuma will be back within this period of time, regarding this, Ayano has no doubt about it.

"You are right…"

Perhaps due to that sentence, Ren's tense expression loosens up gradually, Ayano nods her head naturally.

"That's right, that guy won't die even if you kill him."

"Isn't that going a little overboard…?"

Ignoring Ren's objections as always, Ayano continues to say:

"So to say, our mission is to buy time and weaken the enemy's strength— Let's do it!"

Ayano imbues all her strength as she waves Enraiha. The flames that burst out from the blade spills out like a flood, surrounding the silvery white dragon.

Vritra's body which possesses outstanding fire resistance will not suffer fatal damage if it suffers a direct hit from Enraiha. To use a flame that spill out widely, without concentrating at any point, it should be unable to beat through its defenses. Yet—

"GYYYYYYYWWWWWWWW!!"

The golden flames ruthlessly invades Vritra's body. The silvery white scales and crystal teeth are caught in the flames, and slowly drop onto the floor one by one.

"Phew—"

Placing the swung Enraiha at her shoulder, Ayano breathes out in satisfaction. Seeing that gesture, Ren laughs out, with a slight intention of making fun of her amidst his joy.

"You are finally back to your normal self?"

"Guess you can say that. Sorry, for making you guys worried."

The reason Ayano can wield Enraiha is not because of her father, and she is certainly worthy of wielding it. Because she is undoubtedly the Jutsushi with the purest Kannagi blood in this generation.

Before such power, one cannot relax no matter how strong one's flame resistance capabilities may be. As long as she removed jealousy and machine-like ruthlessness, and uses her power in the most natural state, it is very easy to break through Vritra's defenses.

"Okay, one more time! Follow my timing."

"Got it!"

Just as the two co-operate and prepare to follow up with another attack on Vritra.

"You two… don't seem to know your own places?"

Mikaeru's consciousness sounds off in their minds.

"Watch this!"

With that said, a horn protrudes from the inside of the dragon's forehead. That impressive sharp horn that matches its gigantic body very well— On its surface, there is a female figure like those statues at the front of a ship.

After recognizing who this female is, Ren cries out loud:

"It's Misao!"

The change does not end there.

"Woah…"

Misao's face continues to emerge like bamboo shoots after the rain, gradually covering the entire outer surface of Vritra. Seeing such an eerie sight that would one find it hard to look at directly, Ayano and Ren shifted their eyes away at the same time. ("Bamboo shoots after the rain" is a saying in Japan, this is because the rain will wash away the soil, revealing the bamboo shoots. It implies the appearance of something after an event. Please ask Japanese translators to give a better explanation if required.)

"See— now you guys won't be able to attack can you? You might as well just get killed by Vritra, I will place your heads right before Yagami's eyes!"

"GRRRRRYYYYYYWWWWW!!"

While dodging the black flames that fall down like rain, Ayano seems to be out of ideas, and asks Ren:

"What do you think? Which one do you think is the real one?"

"Normally speaking it should be that horn… But I don't want to push my luck."

"Yeah, I agree. It feels as though it is placed there on purpose, as if luring us to it."

"GRRRRLLLLYYYY—!!"

A magical formation appears below the dragon's feet. In resonance with its roar, lighting emerges from the gaps in the patterns.

(Lightning strike—!)

Ayano shouts out immediately:

"Hide behind me!"

"O…Okay!"

Enraiha is swung out horizontally. A wide area of fire forms a protective shield, blocking countless fire-balls. (Chinese translation error? I think it should be lightning balls…)

Withstanding the impact of hundreds of lightning balls, Ayano curses angrily:

"He seems to be getting a little arrogant thinking that we cannot retaliate…"

"Nee-sama! In front!"

"—!"

As Ayano is focusing on maintaining the kekkai, Vritra quietly snuck towards them, its vicious hooked claws are now closing in right at them..

Ayano wanted to chop its entire arm off at first, but she saw Misao's face within the dragon's palm. She was smiling.

"Argh—"

Ayano changes the path of her sword in an instant, and finally managed to only cut the hooked claws. She hurriedly pulls her distance away and gets back into her battle stance, but is completely out of ideas on what to do.

"Nee-sama, what should we do?"

"—What do you think we should do?"

Ayano smiles and shrugs her shoulders as she thought to herself:

(Luckily he didn't ask for twenty minutes.)

The promised five minutes is almost up, at this rate, they will probably pull through.

(Come back quickly, Kazuma. If you dare say "give me another five more minutes", I will not let you off.)

"WRRRRRRYYYYYYYYY!!"

"Damn— How annoying!"

Just as Ayano is using Enraiha to reflect the who-knows-what-number wave of attack.

Suddenly, a certain feeling emerges from the back.

Even though there is someone at the back, Ayano shows no sign of wavering, and instead accepted this feeling.

Clear with a sense of stability within. Basking in this feeling, she adapted to it without even realizing it, as if she had been fighting like this for years now.

The two stands at the most effective, and most comforting position there is.

To click together as one. That is the kind of feeling.

Ayano asks without even turning her head:

"Isn't this a little too quick?"

"Because a boastful someone was chased everywhere. I don't have a choice, but to return sooner. Be grateful!"

Hearing the usual sarcastic reply, Ayano laughs. This guy, he will probably talk like this to his very last breath before his death?

The surrounding winds begin to glow with a faint blue shine. Ayano grabs Enraiha tightly once more,

gathering energy for this moment. Like a bow pulled back fully, all the energy is gathered at a single point—

"Go!"

Together with that angry shout, Ayano waves Enraiha down with all the strength she can muster.

Ren and Ayano separated while they were running around evading Vritra's attacks.

"Nee… Nee-sama…?"

As Ren is intending to confirm his nee-sama's safety, an exceptionally powerful energy wave flew into his consciousness all of a sudden. As he is too close to it, there is no way for him to judge where it originated from. This feeling that seems as though the surrounding space shook, caused all his hair to stand up.

The impact came from the right side. An azure flame bursts out, and uses its cleansing light to surround Vritra's huge body. The cleansing power burns off more than half of that silvery white body, Vritra loses its dragon appearance in an instant.

"Otou-san?"

Even though he knows its impossible, Ren still called out without thinking. A crystal clear azure glow, an incomparably powerful cleansing power. Without a doubt, that is the ultimate flame that Kannagi Genma controls—"The Azure Flame".

But, Genma is still in the hospital, and he must definitely get some quiet rest, there is no way that he can appear in a place like this.

Ren follows the path of the flame, and saw that…

"Ah…"

He sighs out in relief, as if a great burden has just been lifted, and sits down onto the floor entirely. Just as he relaxes, he is also completely drained, but it doesn't matter. Because his mission is over, all that is left is to cheer for those two.

"Go on! Nii-sama, Nee-sama!"

Ren roots for them softly.

"Wow…"

Ayano opens her eyes wide, staring at the flame that she is releasing.

The azure wind— winds in a spiraling motion stained with the color of Kazuma's "ki", revolving

around the golden flames that are bursting out. The two powers combine together very naturally, and boost each other.

Even hotter, even clearer— a holy flame that pushes "cleansing" to its extreme, achieving the goal of vanquishing evil, and perhaps even through dimension, it might even be called a divine flame. Even though it feels like she is being treated like a living kerosene gun, but Ayano still continues to release flames.

Kazuma stands up to the front.

"— Kazuma?"

"Continue."

Kazuma gives a short command, and then rides the wind, flying up into the sky. As if the synchronized feeling just now is just an illusion, Kazuma leaves Ayano's side without a care, flying towards the remains of Vritra.

"…"

What he is there for, there is no need to even ask. Because the reason is so obvious, yet even though she knows the reason—

"Ahhhh! This is infuriating!"

In response to Ayano's fury, the flame burns even more vigorously.

How can this be!?

Within Vritra's gradually collapsing body, Mikaeru's face becomes stiff from fear.

(How can this… Impossible… This has collected several hundreds— almost one thousand people's vigor! But, how is it possible that it lost against a mere three people? Just who the hell are they? Are there really anyone that can accommodate such an immense power among humans?)

In the end he is still unable to understand. But in reality, he is being beaten. Vritra has been destroyed beyond recovery, all the vigor collected through Misao has all been used up as well.

Defeated.

He can only admit it. There is no way to turn this around, this is failure.

Mikaeru decides to retreat instantly.

(Remember this— Yagami Kazuma! One day I will definitely—)

He separates himself from the remains of Vritra—the area which had been the head, that place is already a sea of flames. The azure flames mercilessly rip off the layers of youki.

The corroding horn stands tall before his eyes, Mikaeru uses eyes of hatred to stare at the girl sealed within.

"Useless thing."

He can't help but curse, yet he never expected anyone to reply.

"I believe you don't have the right to say that!"

Mikaeru turns around, as if struck by lightning.

"Ya…Yagami Kazuma!"

A pathetic voice can be heard with it. Kazuma has no intentions of mocking his pathetic state, and just lowers his head to looks at Mikaeru silently.

"I knew it, just as things doesn't seem right, you will definitely run off. Because a kid like you, don't have the determination or will to fight to your death."

That is a plain tone that bears no emotions, as if the other party does not even deserve to be humiliated.

This reaction hurts Mikaeru's pride deeply, but he still forces a smile.

"Just take it that you won this time. But, don't think this is over, I will come back again!"

With that, Mikaeru activates teleportation. Even though a kekkai that prevents teleportation has been set in this area, but that is specially designed against Misao, and is insufficient to seal Mikaeru's teleportation. If it is just a short distance teleportation, there should be no problem—

"Wha—What?"

"What's wrong?"

Seeing the shocked Mikaeru, Kazuma asks with an uninterested expression.

Mikaeru stares at his dreaded enemy that bears an easy expression on his face, and tries to activate teleportation once more.

—Failure.

No matter how many times he try, the result is still the same. The distorted space created to link two points up, gets destroyed immediately after it is created.

"How… How can that…"

Mikaeru stares blankly at Kazuma. There is no doubt, this must be Kazuma's doing. But—

"You… You can see it? Could it be that you can see through the distorted space I created amidst this rampaging space!?"

"You can take it that way."

"…"

Kazuma nods as if its only natural, Mikaeru looks as though he is about to go mad as he stares at Kazuma.

The azure flames release such a massive energy that even space has begun to be distorted. Under such conditions, a small distortion created for teleportation should not even be noticed.

To put it simply, it is just like locking onto a ripple made by a small fish amidst the sea surface being rampaged by a storm. It is not humanly possible.

"You… Just "what" the hell are you?"

Watching the murmuring Mikaeru, Kazuma smiles proudly.

"— To not even know this, you dare to challenge me?"

Mikaeru uses fearful eyes to look up at Kazuma, looking into those blue eyes that bears a clear and deep luster within.

"A contractor…"

Someone under a contract with the spirit lord of the winds, to control all winds. To form a contract with an extraordinary existence, the world's only "Contractor".

Those blue eyes can be seen as proof of being a saint. A messiah that represents a spirit lord on this Earth, the mark of a saint—Stigma.

"The winds will tell me everything. Where there is air, nothing can hide from me."

"Damn… Dammit… You monster…!"

Mikaeru murmurs unhappily, then draws a dagger out and jumps out. Not towards Kazuma, but to that standing sharp horn at the back— Misao who is sealed within.

"Don't move!"

Placing the dagger at Misao's throat, Mikaeru shouts:

"I know. I know very well, you will not stand to watch this girl die, so I still have one last trump card. It is still to early for you to get cocky! Yagami Kazuma!"

He shows a sinister smile, and uses a sharp voice to say.

That face no longer has any of that innocent look that a child would have. A young appearance matched with an ugly, greedy expression, that unsuitable feeling made him look even uglier.

Kazuma seems uninterested as he listened to Mikaeru's threat, and grumbles in his mouth:

"— What an unworthy death."

"Don't move!"

Kazuma ignores his warning, and stretches his hand into his chest to get a cigarette. The way he lighted the cigarette looks very lazy as well, drawing the smoke deeply to fill his lungs.

"You…You think I am kidding you!? If you want this girl to live—"

"Enough."

Kazuma stops Mikaeru in his speech.

"Wha… What—?"

"I have seen this already. If you don't have any other tricks, then die!"

From a high altitude far away, Kazuma says that. As if saying, if you can perform some interesting new trick to please him, then for this period Kazuma will "let him live temporarily".

"You bastard…"

Against this unbearable humiliation, Mikaeru's voice and the hand he uses to hold the dagger begins to tremble. His bloodshot emerald eyes gradually loses rationality.

"You bastard… You bastard… You bastard—!!"

Mikaeru gives off a scream at a frequency beyond what humans can hear, then thrusts the dagger in his hand. Just as the sharp blade is about to slit Misao's throat.

—Swish!

Mikaeru's right arm is severed from his elbow on, fresh blood gushes out like a fountain.

"Ah…Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

Following that, the remaining two legs and left arm were sliced apart from their roots. Mikaeru's caterpillar-like body, then rolls into the pool of his own blood.

Kazuma steps onto Mikaeru's stomach with force. His stomach seems to have been broken by the step, but at this point in time there is no point in caring about that.

"I had originally intended to slowly torture you, but I don't have that much time either— so bear with it."

Kazuma kicks Mikaeru like a soccer ball and sends him flying. The tiny body flew off in an instant, and falls into the fiercely burning azure flames in the end.

This body that has suffered heavy injuries, no longer has any power to withstand the power of the purifying flames. The blue flames burns away the the youki that has soaked into the cells, purifying them together with the body. There is no time to even scream, the existence of Mikaeru Hari disappeared from this world entirely.

Kazuma sighs out lightly, and adjusts his breath.

"I wasted too much time, I must hurry…"

A contract with the spirit lord means to borrow the rights of the lord under limitations.

The human body can withstand the power of an extraordinary existence for some time, but this burden is beyond measure.

For example, it is like a person trying to block off an upcoming tsunami alone, to withstand such a massive force based on mental strength alone, there is no way it can last.

Needless to say that his body condition now is very bad, and is at its limit.

Kazuma urges his tired body, and walks towards that sharp horn with Misao sealed within.

To say that she is sealed is actually not accurate enough. Most of the sharp horn has already been burnt away, all that is left is the portion covering Misao's waist and below. There is no constraint on her upper body.

Kazuma stands right before Misao, and places his hand on her forehand, forcing "ki" into her, and then gives a simple command:

"Get up."

"…Mm…"

Misao murmurs softly, her eyelids twitches, and slowly opens.

"…Ah…?"

She doesn't seem to be able to apprehend the current situation, and gives off a puzzled sound. The opened empty eyes gradually regains focus— and at the instant she recognized Kazuma, she opens her eyes wide.

"Kazuma…san…"

She uses a coarse voice to call out his name, there is not a shred of hatred within that expression and voice.

“Yup. Has mind control been completely released? Let’s go back then!”

Kazuma announces calmly, then reaches out to her. Yet, Misao turns her face around, her hands placed before her chest.

“—?”

“Please, just let me… die…”

Misao says with a trembling voice.

Kazuma stares at Misao closely, as if trying to look through Misao’s expression, with her head lowered and is covered by her hair.

“Why?”

“Because… I am a sinner.”

“Oh? So?”

Kazuma seems to find this unbelievable, and asks once more. Misao stares at Kazuma with slanted eyes, probably thinking that he is teasing her on purpose.

“I have committed an unforgivable sin… So… I can only redeem myself through death…”

Kazuma looks coldly at Misao who is seeking atonement continuously.

"You are really important aren't you."

"…Huh?"

Kazuma stands up before the puzzled Misao, and uses the tip of his feet to kick below his feet.

"This guy, it was a really big dragon just now— Did you know what energy did it use to move?"

"Yes… It uses…"

Towards the pale Misao, Kazuma announces the truth mercilessly:

"It is all the people you killed, their vigor."

"—!"

"There is probably a few hundred people— Energy capable of moving that massive thing, I guess it would take more than just a hundred or two people!"

Misao is at a loss for words, she feels grieved over her deep sins and trembles over it.

"Using your "precious" one life, you can redeem the sin of killing several hundred people?"

Kazuma uses an extremely unnatural gentle tone to question her, and then grabs Misao's hair, pulling her lowered face up forcefully.

"Quit joking! Are you some religious chief of some new religion!? Did you think pinning you on a cross can save all the people in this world? Don't be so naïve! You are just trying to run away. Unwilling to face the deep sins you have committed, and unwilling to seek any method of atonement, to just try to escape through death, isn't that right!"

"Ah… Ahhh…"

The weakness within her heart being revealed, Misao's tears fall down like rain.

"Even so… Even so, what do you think I should do? With such deep sins, could there possibly be some way to redeem myself?"

She urges Kazuma for an answer. However, the answer was cruel.

"How would I know."

"You… You…!"

Misao can't help but show an angry expression.

"You are really full of yourself!"

"No matter what others say, I don't know what I don't know. I killed plenty of people too, but let's not mention atonement, I did not even review myself even once."

What a completely self-centered guy. If anyone is to ask for a way to redeem himself, he is probably the most unsuitable person in the world to ask.

“Besides, aren’t you getting the sequence wrong?”

“… What do you mean?”

Not understanding what this sentence means, the puzzled Misao questions Kazuma back.

“Who are the ones you must compensate to first? Is it those people whom we do not even know their names? Or that dumb father that wanted to kill his own daughter but got killed instead?”

Kazuma pauses for a second, then continues to say:

“No! Of course not! The one whom you created the most trouble for, the one who needs compensation most is me! It is me! So before you think about dying or to live, you should repay me first! To put it more bluntly, you have to repay with your body!”

“…Ah?”

Misao realizes that Kazuma is not looking at her face, but staring at the location around a distance of one head below her eyes— around her chest.

She follows Kazuma's eyes towards her chest. Perhaps due to her clothes being dissolved by slimes, Misao is naked, and revealing her natural figure.

At the end of Kazuma's glance, there are two soft bloated objects—

"—!"

Misao senses an unknown danger, and uses her hands to cover her exposed breasts immediately. At the very same time, a large plasma bullet is shot from the ground.

"—Ahh?"

Kazuma uses the back of his hand to deflect the plasma shot without even turning his head around.

"Please… Please calm down, nee-sama!"

"Let me go, Ren! I am going to vaporize that low-down thing right here!"

Seeing the ruckus on the ground, Kazuma complains with an irritated look:

"What an annoying person, there is no way to calm down and talk about the serious stuff like this."

(— Serious stuff?)

Misao can't help but stare at Kazuma's face.

"What's up?"

"—Ha!"

Kazuma asks seriously. The moment she saw that expression, Misao suddenly burst out in laughter.

Misao continues to bend over and laugh, Kazuma on the other hand looks at her with a puzzled look on his face.

"—Have you gone mad?"

"N…No… I am fine."

Misao finally suppresses the urge to laugh, and reaches out to wipe her tears.

Even though so saddened, people can still laugh. What a new discovery.

"I… I must first compensate Kazuma-san right?"

"Ahhh, yes."

Kazuma nods in response, and Misao nods lightly in agreement.

"I got it. Please let me compensate you with all my heart. While I make my compensation to you, I will continue to find ways to compensate the others."

"—Is that so?"

"That is to say— Please help me. I do not wish to die yet."

Misao's lower body is still connected to Vritra's remains. At this rate, she will face the same fate as Mikaeru.

"Understood. These remains, and the youki left in your body, I will purify them altogether. It may waver a little, be careful."

"Okay."

Misao nods lightly, then closes her eyes.

Kazuma rides the wind flying up to the sky, pulling away the distance. Following that, he raises his right hand in the air— and waves down at one go.

The blue wind comes tumbling down from the directly above Misao. The wind blows away all surrounding flames, and purifies all that can be considered "evil" completely.

Kazuma returns to the ground. Ayano and Ren come up to receive him.

"Where's Misao?"

Towards Ayano's question, Kazuma only shifts his eyes slightly upwards.

In the space where the blue light slowly grows faint, there is something that is descending from the skies slowly. The naked female covered in the light seems pure and beautiful, anyone that sees this would be deeply mesmerized.

Kazuma removes his jacket, and places it on the girl that descended from heaven.

As Ayano sees this scene, her eyebrow raised upwards. Perhaps she is reminded of the previous incident— Kazuma completely unwilling to remove his jacket to cover her last time, until she had to strip it off him herself.

"Still alive?"

Ayano observes Misao who is being carried by Kazuma. She is unconscious, but still breathing.

"Yeah, you better go get a car, we are heading back."

"Ah, yeah— By the way, how's your injury?"

"The bleeding stopped, I should be fine as long as I don't move around too much."

Even though he sounds relaxed, but he looks really bad, obviously having lost too much blood.

Ayano says worriedly:

"Should we go to the hospital first? You seem even weaker than Misao."

"I must hand Misao to Suzerain personally first."

"Yeah— you are really gentle aren't you."

"You jealous?"

Ayano reflexively pulls out Enraiha.

"What… What are you talking about! Look at your body condition, you really think you can still fight leisurely? I am definitely stronger than you now!"

"Oh? You want to kill someone that got hurt because of you? Kids these days don't even know basic courtesy."

Raising his head to look at the two staring at each other, Ren sighs out painfully. Once again verifying that these adults before him cannot be relied upon, he decides to contact their family by himself.

"Ah, is it Suou? We are done here, please come to get us. Try to make it quick— Huh? Yes, someone is

injured, but if we don't try to put a stop to this, the surrounding areas… Yes, I leave it to you."

Keeping his cell phone, Ren's focus shifts back to the two. There is no need to even see them to feel that their "ki" is rising.

He really didn't expect the two to be so childish, but just in case, round two may start.

(Suou… Come quick…)

Ren sighs once more, and praying that this calamity can be avoided at the same time.

Epilogue

"Become a nun?"

Hearing a term that was rarely present, Kazuma repeated it blankly. He had thought that it was a joke, but Juugo before him looked very serious about it.

"— What fun is there about it?"

"That is not what this is about!"

Hearing Kazuma's question, Ayano sitting beside Juugo replied in a rough manner:

"Misao intends to separate herself from the mortal world and uses her entire lifetime to compensate for her sins. That is to say, there is no room for you in her heart anymore, you deserve it."

Ayano laughed, and seemed to be happy from the bottom of her heart. As to why she is so happy— there is no need to ask at this point of time.

Ignoring the delightful Ayano, Kazuma asks Juugo:

"So, has she left?"

"Not yet, she was here just now to bid her final farewells, if you rush over now, you will probably still make it."

"You should have said so earlier."

With that Kazuma stood up immediately, and left the room without even turning back. Juugo quietly watched as Kazuma left. That was a natural reaction, and his daughter following behind Kazuma quietly is also within his expectations. In the empty Japanese room, Juugo sipped his tea leisurely. What he has in mind, no one knows.

"— Why are you following me?"

Kazuma finds this unbelievable, and questions Ayano who is walking beside him. Ayano raised her head, her eyes opened wide to stare at Kazuma. Those eyes look as though they are looking at a criminal under custody.

"How can I let you and Misao be together alone. Then you would definitely threaten her, and take her to a motel."

Kazuma did not reply, but only shrugged his shoulders, walking on his own to the backdoor.

"Misao's room is not there."

He ignored the halting voice and opened the door. Misao is there.

"—Kazuma-san."

Her voice seemed a little shocked. Misao did not shift her eyes away, but stared at Kazuma without turning her eyes away.

"Are you really leaving?"

"Yes— I have already decided."

With a solid determination, Misao nodded in reply.

"Just praying alone, that will not lessen my sins. So, I have decided to reevaluate myself through training, and find out what I can do to redeem myself."

"Is it, then good luck."

He said easily. Misao's eyes widened in shock.

"What's wrong?"

"No… Err…"

(The promise—)

On the gradually collapsing Vritra's head, the promise made to Kazuma. Since she has already decided on the path she wants to take, even though she would never be able to fully keep her promise, so she

cannot but feel regret because of it. So, she had thought about it. If she ever meets Kazuma, she will at least fulfill her promise once— But, for an introverted girl like Misao, to place "that kind of thing" to her mouth, that would really require courage of her lifetime.

—Besides, there's an Ayano with a scary look on her face at the back.

Just as Misao is hesitant about it, Kazuma decided that the chat is over.

"Bye."

He bid farewell and turned around, Misao hurriedly called out to Kazuma from behind:

"Please… Please wait a minute!"

"—Hmm?"

I must say it— Misao bore an incomparable determination, yet the question that came from her mouth is completely unrelated.

"Why did you help me? To the extent of having suffered such a heavy injury."

"I didn't want to get hurt either."

Kazuma turned back and looked at Ayano past his shoulder.

"If not for some dumb girl doing dumb stuff, I might have been able to solve everything without a scratch."

"…!"

Veins appeared at Ayano's temple, but, she did not say anything to rebut. Because in comparison to scolding him, she is more interested in the truth.

"Even so, isn't it much faster to just kill me?"

Misao did not loosen up her questioning. Even though things weren't going the same way as she expected, this was a question she cannot leave unanswered. Perhaps sensing her determination, Kazuma began to say with a bitter smile on his face:

"It has been ten years already… You were still so small then."

Saying that, Kazuma used his thumb and index finger to open up a gap of around three centimeters.

Misao complains very politely:

"Erm… I think that even when I was just born, I was not that small. I am not a dwarf."

"Don't mind the minor details. Yup, around that time, just as I was being bullied by those people of the branch clan, you saved me once."

"…"

She waited for the explanation to come, but Kazuma doesn't seem to want to open his mouth again. A silent atmosphere looms around the two.

"…Is that it?"

"Yup."

Kazuma simply nods in response to that question filled with question marks.

To Misao and Ayano, they will never know, when Kazuma was belittled by everyone around him, during that period where his body and mind are tortured continuously, that only one single time of gentleness, how great a support it was to Kazuma in his heart.

Kazuma would never forget; that trembling voice, that small back. Even reminiscing about it now, the image was as clear as though it happened just yesterday. So, he did not hesitate. To save Misao— That is the natural conclusion that doesn't even require any thought. Because Misao lent him a hand then, that is why he could live up till now. With that said, there was no way he would say such an embarrassing thing out loud. Kazuma began to forcefully end the topic. He raised his hand to hold Misao's chin, and lifted her

face up. As he slowly moved his face closer, Misao shyly blushes and closed her eyes.

"Hey! Wait a minute!"

Ignoring the noise at the back, their lips touched gently. This shuts one up both effectively and joyfully.

Kazuma showed a cheeky smile, and murmurs lightly to Misao who blushed all the way to her ears:

"Let's continue next time, I will not let you owe me anything, so just go!"

"—Yes, I will be waiting."

Misao smiles as she nods.

A sweet promise. Yet, Misao knew very well in her heart that this will never be fulfilled. Kazuma was saying this to a girl whom he might never meet again.

This also implied "I will never forget you".

It was also meant to tell this lonely girl who lost her family, being exiled from her clan, that she was not alone.

"Thank you to you all. Kazuma-san, Ayano-sama—Please take care."

Misao lowered her head deeply in the end, and then walked out once more. Those steps did not show any sign of doubt. She did not turn back at all, and

disappears from the sight of the two. The two watched the leaving shadow silently.

— But…

"What did you say just now?"

Closing the door, Ayano questioned Kazuma immediately. Her eyes stared straight at him.

"Are you bothered by what I said?"

"Of course not! However, if you dare disturb Misao, I will not let you off! Don't tell me you intend to sneak into a nun's living quarters?"

Kazuma's eyes seem a little blurred, he seems to be fantasizing— thinking about Misao in a nun's costume.

"That seems not bad too."

Hearing Kazuma's mumble to himself, Ayano had a sensitive reaction.

"Ka—zu—ma—!"

A deep low sound sounded off from below the ground, the tight fist trembled due to a dangerous feeling. A vigorous explosion was at hand.

Ayano still did not know now, why she was so angry. Or where that immature, childish feeling of want-

ing to keep Kazuma to herself came from. Whether she will ever realize what this feeling is—That is another story.